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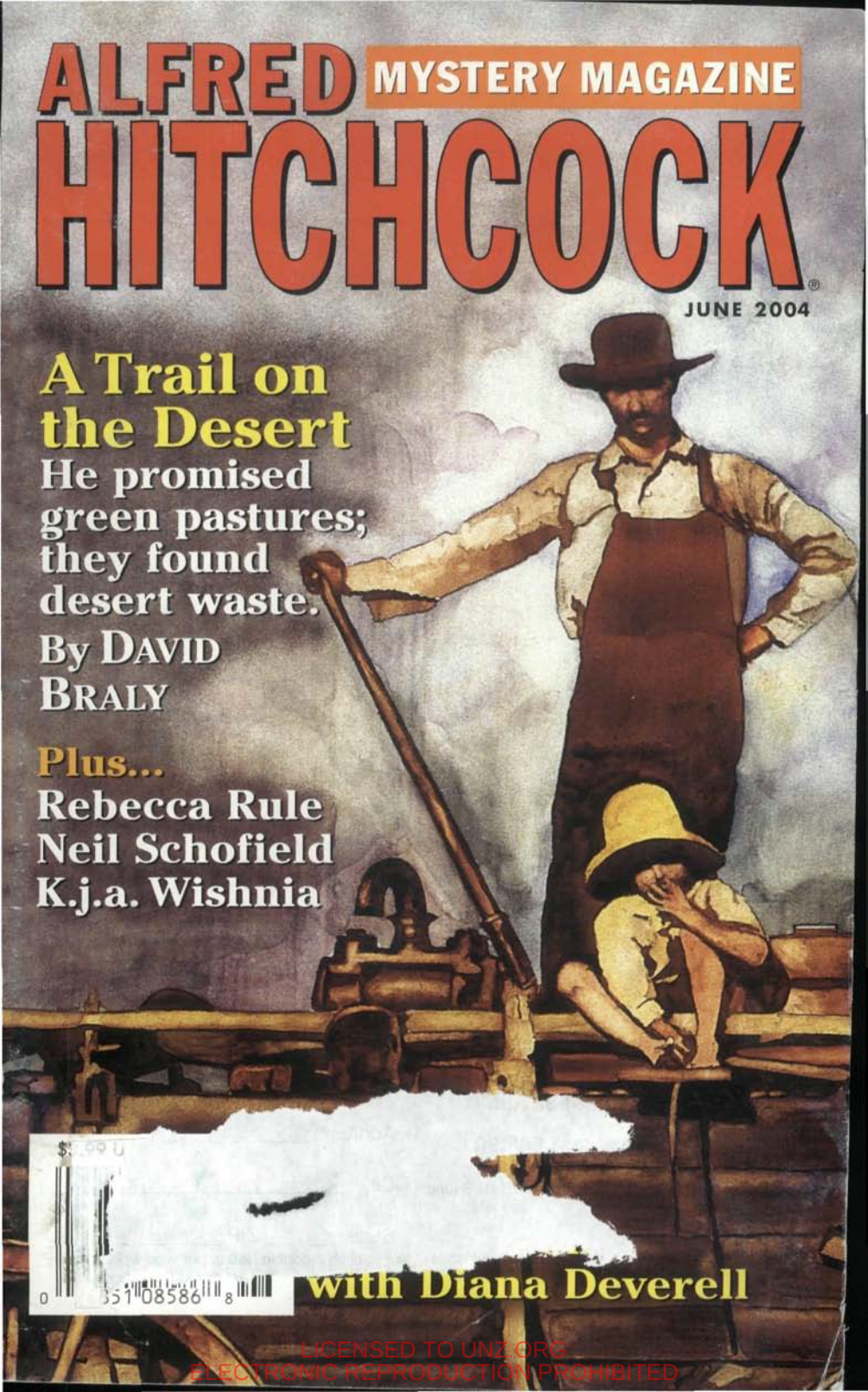

A Trail on the Desert

He promised green pastures; they found desert waste.

By DAVID BRALY

Plus...

Rebecca Rule

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with Diana Deverell

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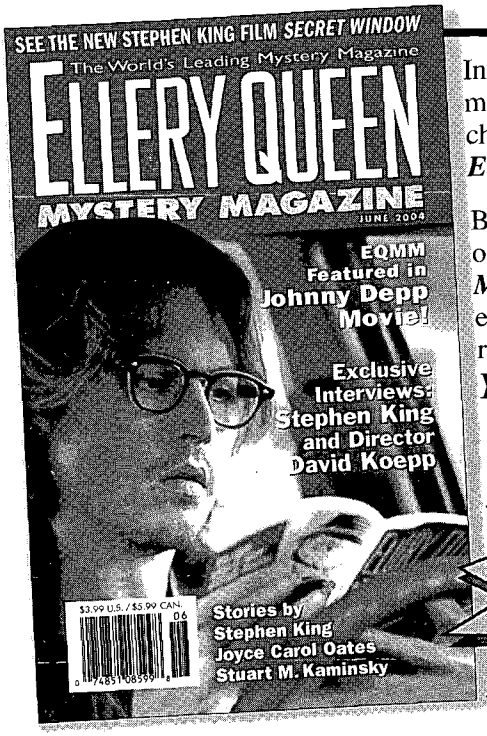
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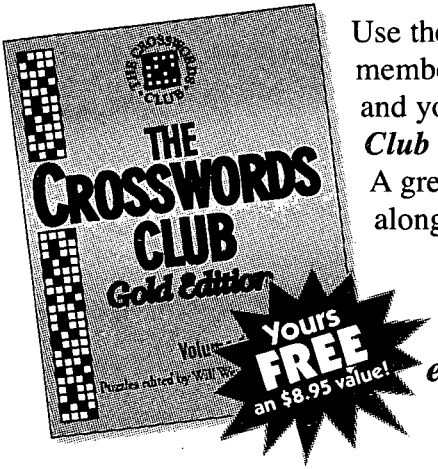

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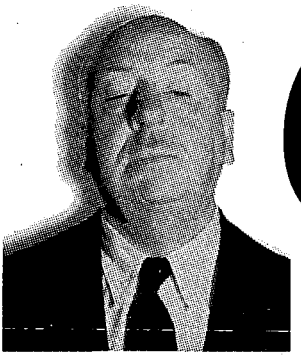

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EDITOR'S NOTES

LINDA LANDRIGAN

THE PATH OF CRIME

Our opening story, "Hazmat Heel-and-Toe" by Diana Deverell, takes us to the New Jersey Turnpike with FBI Agent Dawna Shepherd, and from there we follow a path through crime and mystery: down Forty-seventh Street and the Diamond District of New York City, to a shopping strip in New Hampshire and the coastal region of Maine, to the British Isles, and back again to the desolate Oregon deserts.

We were fortunate to catch Ms. Deverell at home (in Denmark!) for a chat about her inspiration for the character of Dawna Shepherd, a native Texan and college basketball player. You'll find our conversation on page 17 following Ms. Deverell's story.

We are also pleased to welcome two new authors to AHMM this month, Rebecca Rule and Russel D. McLean. Mr. McLean, author of "The Death of Ronnie Sweets," hails from Dundee, Scotland, where he is studying for his masters degree in philosophy at the University of Dundee. "In my spare time I collect old pulp novels and run a Web site dedicated to crime fiction, www.crimescenescotland.com," he tells us.

A New Hampshire native, Rebecca Rule ("Thief") is a writer, humorist, and book reviewer whose column is locally syndicated in New Hamphire. She is the co-author of *True Stories: Guides for Writing from Your Life* (2000) and *Creating the Story: Guides for Writers* (1993), both published by Heinemann. Her collection of short stories, *The Best Revenge*, originally published in 1995, is just out in paperback from the University Press of New England.

A special thanks to all of you who have been sending us your favorite AHMM stories (see page 46). We've enjoyed reading your letters—and have been uplifted by such a heartfelt response!

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HAZMAT HEEL-AND-TOE

DIANA DEVERELL

The message came over the CB in good-ol'-boy code. "Death on Truckers just joined the party on Interstate seven-eight," the invisible driver drawled, and FBI Agent Dawna Shepherd clicked her seat belt into the latch.

Her cell phone chimed. "That'll be Chambers," she said to her driver, Joe Menasria. With one hand, Dawna pressed her cell phone to her ear. With the other hand, she braced herself for the jolt she knew would follow when their liquid cargo shifted.

Across the doghouse from her, Joe released the trailer brakes with a whoosh of air, shifted out of neutral, and moved the chemical tanker across the truck stop lot toward the on-ramp.

"Heard it on the CB," Dawna reported to Benjamin Chambers, her Bureau colleague. Chambers and another agent had been at the I-78 rest area since eight o'clock that morning when the New Jersey State Police Hazardous Materials Enforcement Unit set up their roadside checkpoint—*got the party started*, in trucker lingo. "We're rolling, ETA fifteen minutes." She shut her eyes, concentrating on what Chambers was telling her over the phone.

Joe worked his way up through the gears and insinuated the eighty thousand–pound vehicle into the heavy traffic racing east toward Newark. He smoothly coordinated his shifting with the shifting contents of the tank. Forty-eight hours earlier in North Carolina he'd loaded zinc and manganese nitrates combined with D-Blaze fire-retardant solution. The liquid fixing–preservative was so dense that weight restrictions hadn't allowed Joe to fill the tank to capacity and the glop had an extra thousand gallons of empty airspace to roll around in.

Dawna had joined him that morning at a truck stop near

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Ron Chironna

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Allentown, and after less than an hour riding shotgun in the Peterbilt she knew that certain moves—gearing down too rapidly, hitting the brakes, stomping the accelerator—set the glop in motion, jerking the tractor-trailer combo and her body along with it. A full load of gasoline would have been easier on her spine, but gasoline wasn't exotic enough bait for U.S. Department of Transportation Safety Inspector Andrew Darcy.

Darcy had been hired by USDOT in the wake of September 11th, and the FBI had reports from three different truckers that he was on the take. Today he'd been scheduled to work at the I-78 checkpoint. Now, Chambers confirmed that the newly arrived van was the one assigned to Darcy. The target was in place.

Dawna ended her conversation, snapped the cell phone shut. "We'll get him this time," she yelled to Joe.

Joe nodded, tight lipped. He had both hands on the oversized steering wheel and his gaze kept moving, from the traffic ahead to the rear view in his side mirrors and back again. He'd turned the air conditioner off and diesel exhaust fumes wafted through the open window, thickening the muggy soup that passed for air in northern New Jersey in July.

From the sleeper, the black toy poodle moaned in complaint and resumed her panting. Dawna ignored the animal. Dawna was hot too, but *she* wasn't whining. Joe claimed that the air conditioner drowned out sounds and signals from other traffic, and she damn well wanted him to have all the information he needed to get the truck up to speed. The trailer was labeled with diamond-shaped placards bearing the number 1760 and the number 8 and an alarming graphic of test tubes spilling. The "1760" stood for the contents, monoethanolamine. The "8" meant corrosive—a mild-sounding term for a chemical combination that would burn the flesh off of Dawna's finger if she were foolish enough to dip it into the soup. Corrosive—but not combustible, not flammable, not explosive. Some comfort, but not much for the FBI operative posing as the driver's wife.

Which was why Dawna had demanded final approval of the driver. The setup had to be as authentic as possible, to avoid any later claim by Darcy of entrapment. That meant an actual load of dangerous material, a professional driver, and paperwork in perfect order. She'd vetoed the first two drivers Chambers offered. One had the twitchiness of a high-octane caffeine user and a recent speeding violation. The other's dirty rig and sloppy attire weren't confidence inspiring. He didn't look as though he ever turned a profit.

On the third try, Chambers came up with Joe Menasria and his

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high-gloss midnight blue Peterbilt cabover with the skillet face.

Thirty-eight years old, Joe—named Youcef by his Algerian-born father, but Joe was the name he'd been using since he started kindergarten in a Baltimore suburb—Joe had been an independent tractor-trailer owner-operator for ten years, five of them with a hazmat endorsement on his license. Self-employed, he had an agent in Denver who contracted with shippers, arranging for Joe to pick up and deliver tankers filled with dangerous liquids. His driving record was spotless.

A fact proven to cops in the thirty-three states where the bears had run a make on him since 9/11, when state police forces nationwide began inspecting all trucks loaded with dangerous materials. At weigh stations, chemical tankers with hazmat placards automatically lit up the PARK BRING PAPERS sign. And special squads like the New Jersey troopers set up random checkpoints more frequently. They were looking for mislabeled cargoes, faulty paperwork, and drivers who'd acquired commercial truck licenses fraudulently.

Because of Joe's unusual name and his "possible Middle Eastern" appearance, he invariably got the full cargo inspection and driver background check. But cops who plugged the name Youcef Menasria into the National Crime Information Center always came up with zip, because no bad paper existed on Joe. He was clean and the cops let him roll on down the road without further hassle. The constant delays meant that he hauled fewer loads in 2001 and 2002, cutting his net income by a quarter. The financial losses hurt.

"Other guys who look like me, they quit," Joe had told Dawna when she interviewed him at his home near Baltimore.

Working with a non-FBI partner was always tricky and she'd wanted to check out both Joe and his vehicle. She passed the gleaming Peterbilt instantly. The cabover tractor shouted "money-maker." Lean and compact, Joe had the same well-to-do polished sheen as his truck, but Dawna took her time with him. She had to be sure he'd play his role the way *she* wanted. "You say the other guys quit?" she echoed.

He shrugged. "Couldn't take it, getting stopped by the bears ever' two hundred mile."

"But you could." Dawna's tone was flat and she had her game face on, not giving Joe any clue as to what she wanted to hear.

"I thought about quitting. It gets old pretty fast, being treated like Osama bin Laden's cousin." His eyes, impenetrable as Turkish coffee, locked on to Dawna's. "But I know better than most cops what damage somebody could do with a rig like mine. I can't fault the system for taking a harder look at hazmat drivers."

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Most truckers referred to cops as predators. Was Joe pretending to like them because he was eager for revenge? "So you support stricter law enforcement?" she asked innocently.

Joe snorted. "I put up with the bears. Like you, you flew into Allentown knowing you'd be hassled by Homeland Security at both ends, because that's the price now for riding in airplanes."

"Would you say being hassled is a cost of doing business for you?"

"Being hassled by a few overeager cops, yes. I can put up with that—given the reason. Wait for them to get a little less panicky. Which mostly they have." His voice turned serious. "But these jerks from DOT—they got no excuse. They don't give a damn about protecting this country. I got worked over by one of them and I'm still steamed. You need help stopping him and the others like him, I'm your boy."

Everything about Joe felt right to Dawna and she gave him the thumbs up. Her choice had been confirmed a half-dozen times this morning. Before either of them climbed into the cab, Joe thoroughly inspected the tractor and trailer. He thumped his billy club against each pair of tires to make sure both were fully inflated. He tested his air and electrical connections and made certain the crank to his dolly wheels was securely locked into place. With the same quiet competence, he moved them down the road and into position to wait for Darcy to appear.

And now Darcy had.

They were less than a mile from the rest area off-ramp. Blazing orange signs ordered all trucks with hazmat cargoes to exit. Dawna flipped down the visor to check her reflection. Not that she needed to pat down any stray hairs, her teased platinum tresses were glued in place, the big hair deemed appropriate for a ride-along mama trucking through New Jersey. Andrew Darcy was careful and cautious and Dawna would have to keep her eye on the ball to make this work.

Over the past year, FBI offices along the main trucking routes between Richmond and Boston had gotten reports of a half-dozen DOT safety inspectors extorting money from hazmat drivers. When Chambers brought the problem to the attention of his opposite number in DOT security, he also vetoed DOT's plan to handle the problem internally. He pointed out that the FBI had a mandate to investigate government employees engaged in malfeasance. And that these particular government employees were also interfering with interstate commerce placed them yet more firmly on Bureau turf.

Dawna figured that the Bureau was also trying to improve its

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tarnished image. The elaborate Abscam-style sting wasn't justified by the number of potential arrests, but it showed the FBI protecting the general public from a few rotten apples in a government agency—a government agency that was not the FBI.

The Chambers show had nailed rogue inspectors working near Salisbury, North Carolina; Springfield, Virginia; and Laurel, Maryland. But the FBI operation hit a snag when it moved north. Two weeks ago in New Jersey, Darcy had given the Bureau team a hard look, handed back the vehicle manifest, and waved them through the checkpoint without a physical inspection. The team had gotten the same treatment from two other inspectors. Sitting in the rest areas, Chambers had noted which trucks did get inspected. And he realized that all were driven by an unaccompanied trucker.

Chambers decided the crooked inspectors working in the rougher areas near New York City were more cautious than their southern counterparts. They didn't want to be outnumbered and they didn't want any credible witnesses to their extortion.

Which posed a problem for Chambers. Given that the extortion took place out-of-doors at a spot chosen by the inspector, filming was problematic. Nothing guaranteed they'd get usable video. Chambers insisted that in order to have an airtight court case, a law enforcement professional had to be physically present to see and hear cash being demanded. Chambers wouldn't run the op without an agent in the truck. But he needed one who'd appear harmless.

His solution was a female agent, one with good experience working under unusual cover. Dawna was the obvious choice, though Chambers didn't explain until later how he proposed to make a six-foot three-inch former college basketball player so non-threatening that Andrew Darcy would run his number in front of her.

Personally, Dawna thought the hair, eye makeup, and skimpy tank top were far from threat-free, but she'd confirmed over morning coffee that her new look was a passport to immediate acceptance in the "professional drivers only" section of the truck stop restaurant. The waitress called her "hon," the trucker who borrowed the ketchup called her "ma'am," and nobody told her to go sit with the civilians.

Joe drove slowly across the portable scales, stopping when he drew even with the uniformed New Jersey state trooper standing beside the roadway. The nameplate on his pocket read "C. S. Whitlock."

The glop in the tanker rolled back and forth like bathwater disturbed in the tub, sending tremors through the fifth wheel into the cab. The poodle yapped, high pitched, reminding Dawna that the

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dog—cloyingly named Precious—was part of her cover. She sighed and lifted the animal into her lap. All black curly hair and warm doggy-smelling skin, Precious snuggled happily against Dawna's stomach, inexplicably drawn to the human who liked her least.

Trooper Whitlock ignored both Dawna and the dog. He wore aviator sunglasses and his face was shaded by his broad-brimmed Smokey Bear hat, but not enough to hide the last traces of adolescent acne. In his early twenties, Dawna guessed.

And bored, his voice told her. "Chauffeur's license, log book, and vehicle manifest," he recited. Joe handed over the paperwork. The trooper turned and walked ten feet to a state police van doing duty as a mobile office and passed the documents to a cluster of men inside.

One of whom had to be Darcy, picking his next victim.

Dawna bent lovingly over Precious, trying to look inconspicuous or at least poodle obsessed and not too observant.

Trooper Whitlock moved to the digital readout for the portable scale and conferred for a few seconds with the officer manning it. He stopped back at the mobile office before returning to the truck.

"You called this one pretty close," Whitlock said to Joe. "Better have enough fuel in your tanks to get to where you're going, you'll gross out if you pump in any more."

"Don't I know it," Joe said. "Been running near empty, to stay legal. If that ain't a pain, stopping for fuel ever' two hour."

Whitlock grunted and handed over the license and log book. Dawna knew the log recorded all the stops Joe had made en route from North Carolina and showed his fuel purchases. The log confirmed Joe's strategy for keeping the vehicle's gross weight below legal limits, but the cop was warning Joe that the New Jersey State Police would not relax their vigilance during the last leg of his journey.

Whitlock pointed to a twenty-foot-long, white-painted vehicle parked in the lot behind the state police van. "Pull around and park. Department of Transportation has your vehicle manifest. Inspector may have some questions for you." Making it clear that Whitlock and the state police would back up USDOT if the inspector didn't like Joe's answers.

Dawna felt a surge of adrenaline. Andrew Darcy was nibbling at the bait.

He'd find Joe hard to resist. He not only looked like he had money, he also looked foreign. The way Dawna figured it, with Joe in the driver's seat, the prevailing "potential terrorist" prejudices

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would work for them. Darcy was likely to go after Joe because the inspector would find him a risk-free victim. Who would believe anyone named Youcef Menasria if he claimed that a USDOT inspector demanded a payoff?

By the time Joe had the truck in position, Dawna had her seat belt unlatched and Precious tucked firmly under her left arm. When Joe set the air brake, Dawna pushed her door open and climbed swiftly down from the cab.

"Can't you wait?" Joe's query was loaded with irritation, the way they'd scripted it.

"Sugar, you know I can." Dawna loaded all of her Texas origins into her voice. "But poor Precious can't." She hurried toward the far edge of the rest area, mincing as though her jewel-studded canvas sandals were the stiletto-heeled mules Chambers had wanted her to wear. His image of a femme fatale had to come from Blondie Bumstead. Dawna'd refused the spikes; she liked to be able to move fast if she had to.

Twenty-five yards from the truck, she set Precious on the ragged border of brown grass. Dawna crouched, shoving the dog, trying to force Precious to play the part of bladder-challenged poodle; instead she clung to Dawna's ankles. Dawna kept her back to the Peterbilt, but she was listening intently to the grumble of the idling diesel.

The engine noise stopped abruptly, a good sign. Dawna rose slowly, nudging Precious away from her with one foot. She made a show of juggling the leash, a pack of Virginia Slims, and a lighter, as if she were planning to take a lengthy smoke break. Slowly making a 180-degree turn, she let her gaze sweep over the truck.

Joe was out of the cab, squatting between the headlights, ruffling through his document case. He rose and handed a legal-length paper to Safety Inspector Andrew Darcy.

Darcy was half a foot taller than Joe—at least six-four—but probably weighed less if the lack of flesh on his long face was any indication. The inspector's body was hidden by a long-sleeved white lab coat that reached his knees. He was wearing white pants and white shoes. With his black-framed glasses and clipboard, he looked like a doctor preparing to render a professional opinion.

Joe's shipping manifest was probably attached to the clipboard, and that document profiled a situation Darcy had shown he liked. Not only was the cargo an unusual and highly dangerous material, but the manifest displayed a two P.M. deadline for delivery in Secaucus. From two o'clock on, the shipper was entitled to deduct five hundred dollars per hour from the contract price, until the

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shipment was delivered. All of the penalty for late delivery came from the driver's share of the proceeds.

Darcy clipped the newly acquired paper to his board and Joe climbed in the cab. Pen poised, Darcy stared at the front of the truck as the headlights flashed, followed by the turn signals.

Dawna used an open hand to hold the cigarette, hiding her expression, in case any of her glee was visible.

Darcy was checking out the rig. The extra paper he'd taken from Joe must have been the last official vehicle inspection report. If Darcy found an obvious violation of the complex and highly technical regulations governing hazardous material transport, he'd have a valid reason to issue a summons to Joe, one carrying a hefty fine.

He wouldn't find anything wrong. The FBI had made certain that Joe's rig was bulletproof.

Darcy would have to trump up a bogus violation. Joe was wearing a wire and they'd get everything on tape. But if this case got to court, Dawna wanted to corroborate Joe's testimony. She needed to see Darcy make his criminal demand. Time soon to move in closer. She dropped the unsmoked cigarette to the tarmac and crushed it under her rubber sole.

A wet tongue caressed Dawna's instep. The damn poodle again. Dawna preferred German shepherds, but they were too scary for this op. She'd borrowed Precious from her firearms coach at Quantico, an ex-Marine who'd proudly tied the curls on Precious's head with a pink satin ribbon. What was it with men and big hair?

"Driver," Darcy called. "Need you back here."

Dawna glanced at the truck. Darcy was at the rear of the tanker where he'd been checking out the taillights and rear turn signals. Dawna heard a door slam and saw Joe walk past the back of the cab, carrying his document case. He vanished behind the tanker. She peered under its belly and saw his feet move toward the rear of the vehicle.

Darcy also disappeared behind the tanker, his body hidden by the eight huge tires on the two rear axles. He had to be waiting for Joe ten feet from the end of the rig.

Dawna started toward the tanker's back end. Excited, Precious ran in a circle, winding the leash around Dawna's calves. Stupid dog. Dawna untangled herself and picked up the poodle. Hidden from Darcy's view, she loped to the truck.

The first words she overheard were from Joe. "Flammable? No, sir, you're mistaken." She heard the flipping of book pages and a finger thudding adamantly against paper. "Take a look."

A few seconds of silence followed by Darcy's voice, reading from the chemical dictionary that Joe carried with him. "Mono-

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ethanolamine, corrosive, nonflammable." The book snapped shut. "You've certainly got your act together." Dawna heard a trace of the Southwest in Darcy's admiring tone.

"I do my best," Joe said.

"I can see that," Darcy drawled in the same warm voice. "I'm not surprised. I'm betting your people come from Algeria."

Dawna blinked. How could Darcy know that?

"My dad was born there," Joe replied cautiously. He sounded as surprised as Dawna felt.

"That's what I figured." Darcy's voice was colored with satisfaction. "When I saw your name. Damn, I love that country. Beautiful place. The beaches, the mountains, the desert—country has everything."

Dawna squatted, still clutching the dog, focused on the conversation, trying to guess where Darcy was heading.

"You've been in Algeria?" Joe asked. Polite but brief, in keeping with his role as a driver with a deadline. The way they'd practiced.

But his four words were enough encouragement for Darcy. "Took some leave there when I was in the service," he said. "Always wanted to go back, but of course that's not an option now. I Google Algeria, all I get are travel warnings. How long's that civil war been going on, ten years?"

"Started after '92," Joe said. "That's the last time my dad was back."

"He's still got family in country?" Darcy asked.

Joe must have nodded in reply.

"I sure hope they're doing okay," Darcy said. "Wonderful people, Algerians. Nicest folks in the world."

Dawna felt like kicking herself. So much for making stereotypes work for them. Darcy was prejudiced all right, prejudiced in favor of Algerians. A brief discussion of labeling as an excuse to reminisce about his Mediterranean adventures, and he'd let Joe go. How many other wrong assumptions had she made about Darcy?

He hadn't finished discussing his North African experience. "Fact is," he continued to Joe, "you remind me of a fellow I met there. Conscientious, hardworking, reliable—just like you."

Dawna registered the falseness in the last three words and her spirits lifted. Darcy was laying it on too thick.

"Glad you think so." Joe clipped off his words, letting his impatience slip through.

Darcy didn't seem to notice. "Yes, I'm very impressed," he continued warmly. "I sure wish I didn't have to do this to you."

Dawna suppressed a grunt of satisfaction. As she'd suspected, Darcy had been flattering Joe to soften him up.

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"Son," he said, drawing the syllable out regretfully, "I'm sorry, but I'm going to have to shut you down. You can't haul liquid of this viscosity in a double conical trailer. Baffles are mandatory."

The last words were gobbledegook to Dawna, but *shut you down* was clear. Darcy was into his game plan. Relieved, she rolled her shoulders to ease the tension. Precious squirmed in her arms.

Joe was still arguing with Darcy. "Show me where the regs require baffles for monoethanolamine. There's no such rule."

" 'Fraid there is. And you're in violation of it. Frankly I don't feel that baffles are critical. To my mind, there's no real danger. But I don't make the rules. And according to those rules, I have to shut you down."

"You can't do that." Anger and panic mixed convincingly in Joe's voice.

He was acting his part to perfection.

"Consignee needs this stuff today," Joe continued. "I got to deliver on time."

Darcy made a sympathetic sound. "Like I said, I'm sorry. I know this is going to cost you, cost the shipper, cost the consignee. But I can't risk letting you go, not when it's so clear a violation."

Darcy was following his usual pattern, one Dawna recognized from the reports. A driver under time pressure was more likely to make a payoff on the spot, rather than go through the less certain and more time-consuming process of fighting the bogus summons. Now Darcy had called Joe's attention to the potential financial losses. Dawna rose from her crouch. She had to move in closer. With luck Darcy'd ask for cash before he spotted her eavesdropping.

"You're mistaken," Joe said stubbornly.

"You're so sure of that, maybe we can work something out." Darcy paused. Probably hoping Joe was smart enough to guess what he meant and offer money.

Joe knew better, of course. "What did you have in mind?" he asked innocently.

Darcy sniffed an exasperated, how-dumb-can-he-be sound. "Well, let me think," he began irritably.

Dawna leaned forward, peering cautiously around the end of the tanker.

"What we need is a way to minimize my risk," Darcy continued. He stopped and looked meaningfully toward the cluster of uniformed policemen a hundred yards away. When Joe didn't speak, Darcy cleared his throat, the rasp full of frustration. Any driver with half a brain would have caught on.

Mentally urging Darcy to name his price, Dawna studied the white-

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clad figure. Below the lab coat, the inspector's pants were too short, revealing three inches of white sock between shoe tops and cuffs.

He was saying, "Maybe if you were to post some kind of—"

His wordy attempt to elicit a bribe offer was interrupted by a guttural growl from Precious, the rumble surprisingly deep and menacing.

Startled, Dawna's glance went from Darcy to the dog. Idiot animal, giving Dawna's position away at the critical moment.

The growl erupted into a series of sharp, staccato barks, piercingly high pitched.

Dawna automatically tightened her grip, but she was a half second too late. Yapping maniacally, Precious leapt to the ground. Dawna grabbed at the leash, but the dog pulled free, racing directly for Darcy. Precious threw herself at the exposed right ankle. The barking stopped.

Darcy shrieked. "What the hell—"

Dawna pounced on the dog, prying at the animal's jaws. But they were locked tight, the teeth sunk in Darcy's sparse flesh.

Darcy stomped his foot, trying to shake the dog loose. "Get him off me," he shouted, swinging the clipboard at the dog. He connected with Dawna instead, smacking her hard on the temple.

Without thinking, she rammed her left shoulder into the back of his knees, toppling him over.

Precious opened her jaws, intent on lunging for a more vulnerable body part. Dawna got both hands around the dog's neck and pulled her away from Darcy.

The inspector scrambled sideways, pushed himself to his feet. He stared at Dawna, his expression unreadable.

So much for her ditzy superfeminine look. Not likely Darcy would let such a rough woman hear him demand a payoff. No, her best move was to abort the op before Darcy realized he was the target of an FBI sting.

"Don't know what got into our Precious," she said hurriedly, clutching the animal to her. "Sweetest dog in the world, never bit anyone." Dawna was lying; Precious had done serious damage before. What was it her firearms instructor had said? Precious loves everyone except—except who? "I'll put her back in the cab," she added.

"You stay right here," Darcy commanded.

What, had he seen through her cover? Dawna froze, her expression giving nothing away. Precious growled and Dawna pressed the dog against her stomach, angling her body so that her torso was between the dog and Darcy.

"Have to thank you," Darcy was saying. "For coming to my rescue.

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Excellent reaction. Aren't many women who could have handled the situation. I bet you've played some ball in your time."

"Some." Dawna's turn to be cautiously polite. Precious rumbled again and Dawna stroked her soothingly on the snout.

Darcy grinned. "And you're not from Algeria, that's for sure. Sounds like you grew up closer to *my* home." Darcy turned to Joe. "No offense, driver," he said to him, "but I recognize the brains behind this trucking outfit. Hell, I've seen her in action."

Now Darcy was softening Dawna up, but she heard nothing false in his flattery. He sounded like every man she'd met who had a thing for big, athletic women. Forget the big hair and jeweled slippers, she should have worn her running shorts and sneakers.

"Like I was telling Youcef," he said to Dawna, "technically your rig is in violation. I don't want to shut you down, but I'll have to . . ."

Darcy let the sentence trail off, but Dawna heard his unspoken *unless*. He'd sized her up and concluded that he *knew* her. She was his kind of woman, from his part of the world, and likely savvy enough to play ball with him.

She thought back to the last words he'd spoken before Precious interrupted him. "I heard you telling Joe," she said slowly, "something about posting—posting what?"

"Good faith money," Darcy replied promptly. "You're a smart lady, you know what I mean, I don't have to spell it out for you."

He was still trying to avoid saying the words that Dawna needed to hear.

"I see," she said slowly. She stopped stroking Precious. The growling resumed. "So how much?" Dawna asked conversationally.

She shifted position, giving Precious a clear view of Darcy. Instantly, the dog howled with fury. Darcy blurted out a long sentence. Dawna heard "good faith" again and "not me" and "given the situation," but Precious drowned out the words in between.

"Can't hear you," Dawna shouted over the frenzied barking, pushing Darcy to blurt out his demand. "How much?" She jerked around, her back to the inspector, blocking Precious's view of him. She tightened her hand around the dog's muzzle. The barking stopped.

"Seven hundred fifty dollars," Darcy said loudly. "Pay me seven hundred and fifty and take that damn dog out of here."

"Done," Dawna said, heading for the cab. "Come on Joe, let's get the man his money."

In fewer than five minutes, the cash was in Darcy's hand and the truck was pulling out of the rest area. Dawna called Chambers on her cell phone. "Pick him up," she said. "We got the demand on tape and he's got the right bunch of bills."

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She snapped the phone shut. "Great job," she said to Joe. She felt a damp tongue on the back of her neck. She turned to look at Precious. The dog immediately rubbed her head against Dawna's upper arm. "And you," Dawna said, "you are the worst partner I have ever worked with."

Joe laughed. "What was her problem with Darcy?"

The white lab coat, Dawna figured. Too much like the one worn by her vet, the human being Precious hated most in the world. The feisty poodle was banned permanently from his office.

"Didn't like his looks," Dawna said to Joe. "You know how poodles are. Most prejudiced dog breed in the world." Precious bumped her nose against Dawna's arm, lovingly pressuring her way back into Dawna's lap where she curled up, sighing happily. Dawna snorted. "Stupid animals. Always making snap judgments of people. Usually wrong."

CONVERSATION WITH

DIANA DEVERELL

Diana Deverell has written two suspense novels featuring U.S. Foreign Service Officer Casey Collins, 12 Drummers Drumming *(Avon, 1998) and* Night on Fire *(Avon, 1999). The athletic and quick-thinking FBI Agent Dawna Shepherd, heroine of this month's story, was introduced to AHMM in "Hungarian Dance No. 5" (November 2000). Ms. Deverell lives in Denmark, but her career in the Foreign Service and other experiences continue to inform her fiction.*

AHMM: What inspired you to create Dawna Shepherd? And why basketball?

DD: While living in Eugene, I fell under the spell of the women's basketball coach who arrived at the University of Oregon in time for the 1993-94 season. I wasn't a fan then, but I've always had a soft spot for people who are impressively competent in areas where I'm useless. And this coach was excellent. Her U of O teams made seven straight trips to the NCAA tournament and won back-to-back PAC-10 championships. She accomplished that while battling the university over Title IX issues, fighting to get equal treatment for her players and herself. I first heard her speak at a business lunch and I was mesmerized. She talked about gender equity, the coming season, strategy—the usual stuff business people expect to hear from a college coach. But her every word was steeped in passion for the game. I sat there captivated, scribbling notes on my napkin, thinking, wow, this woman belongs in a book. I started wondering, what if she'd brought all that fire and heat to a different profession, say law enforcement? That 'what if' morphed into the character of Dawna.

AHMM: Is she featured in any of your novels?

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DD: Dawna made her first print appearance in my second novel, *Night on Fire,* which takes place in Denmark during the shooting war between the Danish Hells Angels and the Bandidos motorcycle gangs. I gave Dawna some experience in the FBI's Biker Gang Unit and sent her to Copenhagen to assist the Danish national police. Naturally she rubs them the wrong way; that's how she works.

AHMM: "Hazmat Heel-and-Toe" has an unusual setting, one that you seem to be familiar with . . .

DD: I was a long haul trucker for four years for North American Van Lines, and figuring I'd be interested, a good friend sent me an article by John McPhee in *The New Yorker* about his travels with an independent trucker hauling hazardous materials. Reading it reminded me that women drivers were still an unusual sight when I was driving and I often had to park and bring in my papers, just to prove that I had a right to be behind the wheel. Like McPhee, I started using a baseball cap for camouflage. At night with my hair tucked up I could pass for a good old boy and that cut way down on the delays. McPhee's article and my memories came together in this story.

AHMM: In what ways has your Foreign Service experience informed your writing?

DD: Because I've lived overseas and worked in the State Department and U.S. embassies, I'm comforable writing about different cultures and about working in a goverment bureaucracy. Both my novels take place overseas and involve embassy locations. I like to use exotic settings and I often decide where a story will take place before I figure out what will happen in it. I find I have better luck writing about places I've been or want to go, rather than the place where I'm living as I write. Maybe I work harder as a writer when I'm imagining a location instead of observing it. Probably it's no accident that this latest story takes place in New Jersey instead of Denmark. Gives you an idea of my definition of exotic when it includes the Vince Lombardi service area on the Jersey Turnpike.

AHMM: Are mysteries a popular genre in Denmark?

DD: Scandinavians group mysteries into the larger category of crime novels and Danes read that genre voraciously. Many bookstores carry American mysteries and the Copenhagen public library has a huge English-language section. Mysteries are also published in Danish translation—books not only by American authors but also by crime writers from all over the world, including the very active bunch in nearby Sweden. One of the bonuses of learning Danish is that I can read Henning Mankell translated into Danish a year before the English version comes out. And it's been a treat to discover Sweden's Liza Marklund, who has a great series about an investigative reporter at a Stockholm newspaper.

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A Trail on the Desert

DAVID BRALY

Jim Randall just happened to be in the Wall Street Saloon that hot, heavy, dreary summer day in 1912 when the detective walked in. Of course, at first nobody realized he was a detective. He was just another stranger in Bend. And Bend was filled with strangers, a boomtown in the making now that the railroad had reached it. Even before that, with the irrigation projects of Alexander Drake and the change in the federal Homestead Act that had increased the amount of land that a person could claim from one hundred sixty to three hundred twenty acres, Bend had been booming. Would-be farmers were arriving in Central Oregon from all over America, all over the world. And they weren't moving to the settled cattle country around the county seat of Prineville. No, they were moving onto the Lower Desert south of the Metolius and onto the Great Sandy Desert south of Bend. Plowing those deserts, planning to farm them. The ranchers near Prineville and along the Ochoco and Crooked Rivers shook their heads in amazement, but the homesteaders didn't listen to the old residents who tried to warn them of their folly. So there was nothing unusual about a stranger entering Bend, or entering the Wall Street Saloon.

Which isn't to say that Jim didn't notice him right away. The detective was certainly noticeable. All sorts of men could be seen in Bend after the rails reached town, and these men dressed in all sorts of clothes, but this fellow had a manner and attire that Jim had never seen before. The stranger was tall, lantern-jawed, with

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small eyes and a wide mouth. His posture was as straight as an arrow, and he held his head high beneath a bowler hat. He wore fashionable clothes that managed to look cheap. Black clothes, for the most part. Jim would almost have taken him for an undertaker, but somehow realized that he wasn't. There was a diamond stickpin stuck in a fancy tie, and undertakers didn't wear diamond stickpins. Few men did. Too expensive, and in a mostly lawless boomtown, too great a target for thieves. But this man looked like he could best anyone who tried to steal from him. Yes, a man no streetsmart thug would attempt to molest.

"I'm looking," he announced to the whole room, "for the deputy sheriff."

Jim turned his attention to Zach Riley. The deputy was seated at the table nearest Jim, playing solitaire while nursing a bottle of whiskey. Bend remained part of Crook County (Alexander Drake and others planned to change that soon by forming a new county with Bend as the seat) and had only a resident deputy and a town marshal to provide law enforcement. Riley, a tall, slender ex-cowboy who had a weathered face framed by wild, rather long gray hair, complemented by a fierce gray mustache, studied the man in the black suit.

"I'm Deputy Riley," he announced in his raspy voice. "What can I do for you?"

The stranger walked over to Riley's table, extracted a business card from his pocket, and rather dramatically put it on the table.

The deputy lifted the card, squinted slightly while he studied it, and read aloud: "Henry T. Kavanagh, Detective, St. Paul, Minnesota." Riley turned the card over, as though looking for more information. "It don't say," he remarked, "*police* detective."

"I'm a private detective."

"Ahhh. And what brings a private detective to Bend? The land fraud prosecutions are over and the range war between the sheep and cattle interests has almost died out entirely since the federal government began allocating grazing leases."

"I'm here to investigate the murder of Charles Sloan."

"Are you?" Zach Riley leaned back in his peg-back wooden chair, which creaked slightly in protest. "All the way from Minnesota to investigate the shooting of a land locator in the desert of Central Oregon. Interesting."

"Mr. Sloan's murder has distressed his family."

Riley chuckled.

"You find that funny?" demanded Kavanagh.

"I find it amusing that you would hint that you were here for

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Mr. Sloan's family. Mr. Sloan was making good money as a locator, but not enough for any family he might have left behind to pay the price of a private detective. Nor would a man engaged in such a disreputable profession have come from a family of wealth. Not unless he was the bad sheep."

"Do you think I'm here for myself?"

"No. I think you're about as independent a detective as Mr. Sloan was a locator. Oh, yes, he pretended to be independent. Many locators do. But most of them are secretly employed by one or other of the railroads. Charles Sloan was a railroad agent who posed as an independent locator. The sheriff is of the same opinion. And your coming from St. Paul tells me exactly who you work for, Mr. Kavanagh: the railroad."

Kavanagh stiffened, which surprised everybody, because nobody would have dreamed that the man could have gotten any stiffer than he already appeared. But he managed it. Jim found himself wishing that he were sitting farther away from Riley's table. He didn't really think there would be trouble, but he might be wrong and he didn't want to get hurt accidentally. Too late to get up and move, though; everybody would see it as rank cowardice. So Jim just continued to sit there, watching the two men. Everybody in the saloon was watching them and listening.

"In any case," snapped Kavanagh, "I'm here to investigate the murder. Something that apparently neither you nor the sheriff bothered to do."

"Oh, I investigated it. Just didn't make any arrests."

"Well, perhaps I'll have greater success uncovering the identity of the guilty party or parties."

Riley paused to sip his whiskey. "And why are you here looking for me, Mr. Kavanagh?"

"I've read that Mr. Sloan's body was found at a place called Coyote Ridge near the homesteads of Andrew Potter, Roy Maclean, Oscar Peterson, Ludwig Eisenbild, and William Marston. I need to examine the site of the murder and interview all of those people, as well as others who might—"

"Jim!"

Jim Randall flinched when Riley called his name so suddenly and so loudly. He promptly stood and stepped over to the deputy's table.

"Jim," said Riley, "I assume you've heard everything? Never mind. I want you to take Mr. Kavanagh here to Marston's farm." He looked over at Kavanagh, studied him without friendship. "He'll pay you well for your time."

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"You bet," said Jim. "I'll go get the buggy."

As Jim turned toward the door he heard Riley explain to Kavanagh that Jim Randall was a sometimes employee of a local livery who could get him to the Coyote Ridge area as easily as Riley himself.

Jim had no doubts about why the deputy had directed Kavanagh to him. Riley didn't want to go riding through the desert on a hot day when he wouldn't get any more pay for doing it than he would for relaxing in the saloon. Jim, on the other hand, could use whatever money Kavanagh handed him for his trouble, especially with Elaine pregnant again, less an appropriate percentage to Riley for the recommendation. What the deputy called a commission. What a good number of local office holders called a commission, now that Jim thought about it.

It wasn't a pleasant ride. Not because of the company, although Jim discovered right quick that Henry T. Kavanagh, detective of St. Paul, was not a talkative man. Downright laconic. Too bad: Jim would've liked to have learned something about how a man came to be a private detective, what sort of cases he handled, and other interesting things. However, the reason for the unpleasantness of the ride was simply where the drive occurred. Going into the Great Sandy on a hot summer day was never pleasant.

The Great Sandy stretched from the Prineville Palisades to the California border and beyond. It was a vast, rugged, desolate land. Sometimes called the High Desert and other times the Artemisia, the Great Sandy was filled with lonely miles of nothing. Junipers, sagebrush, and here and there patches of bunch grass that served mostly to attract gullible outsiders to settle on desert "farms," it was alive only with jackrabbits, coyotes, lizards, rattlesnakes, and the shadows of the carrion birds that circled in its skies hour after hour, day after day. The sun baked and cracked the land, and the fringe of the buggy was no protection from its blistering heat, which was reflected into the buggy off the rocks and the sand. A few years ago a person could travel for many miles without seeing anything except what had been formed by nature. Today, of course, the buggy was never out of sight of some homesteader's "improvement," whether it was a tent that housed the man's family, a shack that had replaced such a tent, a windmill, a line of piled rocks meant to form a property boundary, or a twisted juniper-pole corral imprisoning scrawny mustangs rounded up on the desert. Everywhere were piles of sagebrush hoed up by sweating homesteaders to make room for the crops they believed would grow there later.

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"There's a waterhole about a half mile west of here," Jim told Kavanagh after they'd driven for two hours. "If you'd like to refill your canteen, I can go by."

"How far is it to the Marston farm?"

"Another half hour."

Kavanagh picked up his canteen from the buggy floor. He balanced it in his hand for a moment. From the sound of the water within it, Jim realized that there wasn't much left. A half dozen swallows, no more.

"I reckon I can hold out until we get there," said the detective at last. "Is there water there?"

"Probably not, but we can go over to the waterhole on the way back to Bend."

Kavanagh shook his head. "What are all these people doing out here?"

"Trying to farm."

"You don't farm a desert."

"They were told they could."

"By whom?"

"Mostly the railroad and its agents, Mr. Kavanagh."

Kavanagh gave him a hard look that made the hired man wish he hadn't mentioned the railroad. He'd forgotten for a moment that Kavanagh himself was one of those secret railroad agents.

But it raised a question in his mind. A powerful desire arose within him for an answer to the question. The trouble was, he suspected he shouldn't ask it. Yes, he was pretty sure that Henry T. Kavanagh wouldn't appreciate him asking it. Still, though, he really wanted to know. . . .

"What does the railroad care about this fellow Charles Sloan? I mean, I know that he secretly worked for the railroad or some company involved in all this land promotion, but why does the railroad or anybody else in St. Paul care that he got killed?"

"Murder is a serious business, Mr. Randall."

"Well, of course it is. I'm not saying otherwise, Mr. Kavanagh. No sir, not at all would I say it was anything other than serious business. But it's not everybody's business to probe every murder. This locator wasn't even officially associated with any of the railroads. So why the interest? I mean, enough interest to send a detective all this way. A man like you probably doesn't come cheap, even for a railroad."

This last sentence, though pronounced with a casual ease that he believed would tie it right nicely to the previous words, was a calculated flattery. Jim didn't know much about detectives, but he

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was sure that they weren't highly paid professionals and that a big railroad like those owned by such tycoons as James J. Hill or Edward Harriman could afford a thousand of them without straining its bank account.

"Let's just say," declared Kavanagh in a self-important tone that was at once both boastful and confidential, "that the railroads have an interest in keeping their agents safe, and that means extracting justice for any agent that is murdered."

"And you believe that if you can identify the killer, you can have him sent to jail or hanged?"

Kavanagh looked over at him with some surprise, as though he'd heard something incredibly naive. "That is the usual procedure, isn't it?"

"Yes." A tiny smile formed at the corners of Jim's lips. "It's the usual procedure, true enough."

"Who's that coming down the road?" asked Kavanagh.

Absorbed in the conversation, Jim hadn't seen that a wagon was coming toward them over the wagon tire ruts that Kavanagh called "the road." But beyond the nearest mirage was a wagon pulled by one horse or mule, with one person on it, and something large in the bed of the wagon. Without yet being able to see it, Jim would have bet a good nickel that the large object was a wooden water barrel.

After they got closer, Jim was able to announce that the man driving the wagon was Andrew Potter.

"Good," said Kavanagh. "Charles Sloan was killed in the vicinity of his homestead as well as William Marston's. I'm going to have to question all of those farmers and I might as well begin right now with this one."

"Deputy Riley thought you should start with Mr. Marston," Jim pointed out.

"Why on earth would I care what Deputy Riley thought?" snapped Kavanagh. "He's had more than a month to solve this crime. When Potter reaches us, stop so I can talk with him."

Jim shrugged and nodded. He had no enthusiasm for this development, though. He knew that Zach Riley had a reason for wanting Kavanagh to speak with Marston rather than any of the other homesteaders near the murder site. Kavanagh appeared to have little respect for Riley, which puzzled Jim. After all, he doubted that Kavanagh earned a higher salary than Riley, considering the respective expenses of where each man lived, and yet Riley was the one relaxing in the saloon while Kavanagh was sweating in a rented buggy going over the desert.

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"Morning, Jim!" called Potter when they reached each other.

"Andrew." Jim reined in the horse. "This here's Mr. Henry T. Kavanagh, a railroad detective from St. Paul investigating the killing of that locator fellow."

"Oh?" Potter, a dark complexioned middle-aged man attired in a wide-brim gray hat, yellow cotton shirt, brown pants, and brown boots, wrapped his reins around the wagon brake. "Well, Mr. Kavanagh, I'm pleased to make your acquaintance, but I hope you fail in your mission."

"Why is that, Mr. Potter?"

"Because all of these locators are a bunch of crooks and from what I've heard Sloan was no different. They ruin your life and charge you fees for doing it."

"And did one ruin your life?"

Potter laughed sarcastically. "I'm here, aren't I? Out at noon on a sweltering hot summer day, in a wagon with an empty barrel on my way to Carter's well for a two-day supply of drinking water for myself, my wife, my kids, and my animals. Every two days I have to spend most of the day fetching water. One day to farm, one day to fetch water. And I'm better off than many. We were sold a bill of goods. I'll regret for the rest of my life the day I got on the train for Chicago."

"Chicago?" said Kavanagh. "What's Chicago got to do with anything?"

"I was approached on that train by an agent of a land company that I now realize must have been owned by the railroad. The man sat down beside me as though his doing so were entirely a coincidence. Naturally we struck up a conversation. Soon he directed it to the subject of Central Oregon. Not that I was aware of his directing it in that direction, but since I had never before given one moment of thought to Central Oregon and that's where it came to, he must have done it. He talked about all the rich meadowland and lush streams, about how several railroads were building tracks into the region that would put Bend on the direct route to San Francisco, about how small villages would soon become huge cities. Overnight they would have populations in the hundreds of thousands. And everybody prosperous."

Potter turned his gaze from Kavanagh and glanced around at the surrounding desert with its junipers and sagebrush. From somewhere nearby came the steady, monotonous, high-pitched buzz of a whistle bug, but otherwise there were no signs of life. Even the sky was empty, the carrion birds busy elsewhere that morning.

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"So you signed a contract," said Kavanagh to bring Potter back to the topic at hand.

"No. He was slicker than that. He never pulled out a contract. Those railroad—" He stopped abruptly and appeared to be both cross and embarrassed.

"Go ahead and say it, Mr. Potter. I'm not a patriot for the railroad."

"Well . . . Well, then, okay. Okay, I will say it. Those railroad snakes are sharper than that. No sir, this fellow wasn't taking his commission from sales. He apparently was paid merely to ride along and arouse an interest in Central Oregon on the part of some of the train passengers, using, I suppose, some secret criteria known only to themselves and their employer. I didn't even know the railroad had received these huge land grants in exchange for building tracks here, though I should have guessed. Anyway, all he did was pique my interest and tell me in a very friendly and casual way that a certain company had material about Central Oregon that I might be interested in, the land there being such a bargain. Not his company, he stressed, but another land company in Chicago. Well, naturally, I was interested. It sounded like the opportunity I'd been looking for all my life. No sir, that fellow didn't put a contract under my nose, nor did the company he directed me to. All the people at that firm did was give me a promotional talk and an armload of printed material with real fancy illustrations of what they claimed was Central Oregon scenes that I now think must have been scenes of Italy, and told me the name of a real estate firm in Portland. So eventually I sold everything, bought a ticket from the railroad, and came out. The Portland firm directed me to a locator in Bend."

"Mr. Sloan," said Kavanagh.

"No. A fellow named Silas Fox. He charged me a hundred dollars to find the very best available land. A hundred dollars. They all charge big fees like that and make a big pretension of locating really good land. And in the end, it's just another piece of desert. The grass on it is deceptive. It's not like the grass back East. The only water comes from the sky, and little of that. So every other day . . . Well, Mr. Kavanagh, I'll tell you. I've heard they're going to build a big sawmill in Bend real soon. If that's true, I'm going to walk away from my homestead to work in that mill. Real money is better than desert dreams."

"You don't mean just walk away?" asked Jim, conscious that he had no business interjecting his question during Kavanagh's inquiries but too amazed to stop himself. "Not just up and leave your house?"

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"My house, my barn, and my corral. I couldn't in good conscience sell the farm. It's worthless." Potter looked out over the desert again, sighed, and said sourly, "And everybody prosperous."

"Mr. Potter," said Kavanagh, "where were you the day that Charles Sloan was killed?"

"At home with my wife, Mr. Kavanagh. As I already told Zach Riley when he was out here a month ago."

Potter unhooked the reins from his wagon brake, snapped them, and his horse resumed its journey.

Jim snapped the buggy reins and the horse resumed trotting toward the Marston place.

"I hope Mr. Potter's attitude isn't typical of the men who have settled here," said Kavanagh.

"No, sir. Mr. Potter's a bit smarter than the others."

"What's that mean?"

"He realized sooner than most that he'd been fooled by the locators. Both those on the trains and in the local towns. Hundreds of homesteaders are still sitting out on the desert waiting for their crops to grow after a really good, wet, cool season. Only trouble is, that sort of season comes rarely to this part of Oregon. On the western side of the Cascades, it's different. But these homesteaders are on the wrong side of the mountains. That's why most of the original pioneers settled over on the other side."

Jim could have said more, but he got the distinct impression that Kavanagh didn't like what he was hearing. So he said no more. The price of the buggy ride hadn't been firmly agreed upon, only that Kavanagh would pay him well, and Jim was not by nature any sort of crusader.

Jim didn't know William Marston's story, but he suspected it was the same as most of the new settlers on the desert. They'd either been hooked by fancy advertising, a smooth talk, or the hard pitch of a locator on a train with samples of fruits alleged to have been grown in Central Oregon. Big, juicy, sometimes exotic fruits. Of course, people traveling trains back East had no way of knowing that one reason people who already lived in Central Oregon looked forward to visiting friends or relatives in the Willamette Valley or Portland was the opportunity to stock up on fruits and vegetables. Except near the lonely rivers and creeks, there were few fruits that grew naturally here. What grew best here were cattle and sheep, and they did it on bunch grass and stacked hay, not on melons and grapes. But now homesteaders were trying to grow every sort of fruit and vegetable in their little gardens.

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"The country's getting worse," observed Kavanagh.

For a moment Jim didn't understand what he was talking about. But then he realized Kavanagh was talking about the terrain. They were entering a district where the hills and flat desert were potted by rocks, some of which were the size of melons and some of which took the form a large basalt pillars.

Soon the Marston place came into view. It was an unpainted, unshaded, typical homesteader house: two stories, but small, with a few tall, dusty windows beneath a roof pitched steep enough to slide off a snowfall in Buffalo.

As they got closer, Jim could see that Marston had stacked buckets and barrels near one corner of his house. Obviously they were there so that they would be quickly available in case it rained. Many homesteaders kept buckets and barrels handy, so that if a cloud appeared they could spread them around their houses, under the eaves, to catch any rain that might drip off the roof. He doubted that water acquired this way was used for drinking or bathing. But he only doubted it; he didn't know for sure. He'd been surprised a few years ago when he learned that water hauled from a stream or well went through a long series of uses: first, to wash the dishes, then the man would bathe in it, then the woman, then the children, and finally it would be given to the livestock to drink. Never had Jim been so glad that he lived in a town like Bend rather than on one of the "farms" on the desert.

When they reached the house, the front door opened and a woman stepped out.

"Afternoon," she said in greeting.

"Afternoon, ma'am," said Kavanagh, raising his bowler. "My name is Henry T. Kavanagh, and I'm here to speak with Mr. Marston, if he is available."

"Out in back, about a quarter mile. You best leave your rig here. The land wouldn't be too gentle with a little buggy."

While Kavanagh thanked her, Jim set the brake and tied the reins around its handle. They got down. Mrs. Marston apologized for not watering the horse, but said that William never went for water until after work late in the day. Jim said that it would be no problem, that they would go to the waterhole after they left.

As they were walking around the house Kavanagh asked Jim if the waterhole he'd just mentioned was the same waterhole he'd mentioned earlier as the place to refill his canteen. When Jim said that it was, Kavanagh appeared bothered, though Jim had no idea why.

They saw a man in the distance, working at something in the

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hot, early afternoon sun, and started toward him. Jim noticed that Marston had built a hip-high wall with rocks that he'd cleared off his field. There was no mortar, only a long row of basalt, about three feet wide at the base and at least a quarter mile long, consisting of hundreds of rocks. Many of the rocks looked big, dark, heavy. Sharp edges upon them reflected the sun to produce tiny points of glitter.

Before they reached him, Marston saw them approaching. He stopped working, probably happy for the excuse. He'd been digging up an eight-foot-tall sagebrush using a grub hoe. His property was covered with sagebrush, and Jim knew from having listened to other homesteaders that the deep roots of the sagebrush prevented it from being unearthed even by a team of animals. It took hard labor with a grub hoe, which meant it was the muscles of a man that ached rather than the muscles of the horse, mule, or oxen.

Jim made the introductions, which was really the only reason other than curiosity for him to have walked out with Kavanagh.

Marston studied the detective without betraying an emotion. The homesteader was a young man who was beginning to look old without going through a middle age. He was a short, wiry fellow, with sweat-wet black hair and blue eyes already half dead on his narrow face. That afternoon he wore old brown boots, brown pants, a leather belt, a sweat-wet white cotton shirt, and a wide-brimmed, badly sweat-stained straw hat.

"The deputy was already out here a month ago to ask me about the killing," he said. "I told him everything I knew about it."

"Then you'll have no objection to repeating it to me."

Marston shrugged.

Jim squatted down on his hams and picked up little pebbles while Kavanagh and Marston talked. When he had enough pebbles, he shook them slightly as though they were dice, gently, not too loudly, while he listened. He listened more to the talk than to the pebbles but felt obligated to act as though he was listening to the pebbles.

"Had you met Mr. Sloan before the day of the shooting?" asked Kavanagh.

"Yes. The locator on the train told me that if I decided to take up land in Central Oregon I would be right smart to find me a locator in Bend or Redmond to direct me to the best land. He said all the land was good but a locator could find the very best."

"So when you arrived in Bend, you looked for a locator," guessed Kavanagh.

"Right. Nobody warned me because I didn't know anybody yet

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to warn me. But I knew enough to avoid the railroad agents. What I didn't realize was that many locators and land salesmen who pretended to be independent were actually employed by one or the other of the railroads."

"Among them Charles Sloan?"

"That's what I found out later. After I'd paid him a hundred dollars to find me a really great tract of land. This tract of land, Mr. Kavanagh. This . . . farm."

"When was this?"

"A year ago."

Kavanagh withdrew a couple of cigars from the inside of his black jacket. He put one in his mouth and to Marston's surprise and obvious delight offered him the other. After Marston had put it between his lips, Kavanagh struck a match and lit both of their cigars. Jim didn't feel slighted, not being a smoker, and in any case accustomed to being ignored in such circumstances.

"Where are you from, Mr. Marston?" Kavanagh asked, his tone much friendlier now.

"Philadelphia."

"Philadelphia! My goodness, sir, you are a long way from home. Why would anyone leave a fine city like Philadelphia to come out to Central Oregon?"

"Opportunity . . . or so I thought. I wasn't doing my best in Pennsylvania and thought a change of scene would be just the thing. The Marstons have lived in Philadelphia for two generations, and in Pennsylvania since colonial days. I thought it was time for a change. Other people had gone west and done very well. A friend of my father's from his school days had gone out to California and acquired a considerable fortune in the Sacramento area."

"Your reasoning sounds logical," agreed Kavanagh in a ponderous manner. Jim could see right through the phoniness of the man and wondered if Marston could. But if Marston did, he gave no indication of it. "Tell me more about Philadelphia."

For more than half an hour they talked about Philadelphia, about Marston's life there, about how he'd met a locator on a train trip from Boston and been convinced of the treasure awaiting any bold young man in Central Oregon.

"Tell me," said Kavanagh at last, "what happened on the day of the killing."

The question had come amid the casual conversation that had developed between the two men, and Jim noticed that Marston's tone remained the same. The detective had won his confidence, removed his defenses.

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"There's little to tell. I was cutting down junipers on the back forty, up against Coyote Ridge over there, when Sloan rode up. Just rode right up to me. I hadn't seen him in three, four months. Had no further business with him. I'd had enough business with Mr. Charles Sloan. But there he came."

"What did he want?"

"To sell me more land! Can you believe it? After all my complaints to him and about him, he came out here to try to unload more land on me. He said that he was distressed—that was his word, *distressed*—that I'd been dissatisfied with my purchase and he wanted to make it up to me by putting me onto some better land that was opening up near the Drake ditch. Of course, he would have to charge me another hundred dollars, but he assured me that the fee would be well worth it."

"Did you accept his proposition?"

Marston laughed. "You know," he said, "he was so convincing that I might have, despite what he'd done to me before. He sounded so sincere about being sorry and about wanting to help me just because he liked me so much. But I'd learned more about him than I'd known when I paid him the fee. Other men had told me plenty about Charles Sloan. I knew that he was a swindler, and I knew that he worked for the railroad. And besides, I didn't have another hundred dollars."

"Would you show me where your discussion with Mr. Sloan occurred?"

"Well, it is a distance . . ."

"I've come here all the way from St. Paul, Mr. Marston."

"Yes . . . yes, of course. I'll show you."

Jim had heard no invitation for himself, but he walked along behind the other men anyway. He had no reason to stay in Marston's field with the grub hoe. And he was curious about the site of the murder.

Coyote Ridge was a hundred-foot-tall border of basalt covered with dirt, juniper, and sagebrush, at the edge of a prehistoric lava flow. Part of it crossed Marston's homestead, and he had cleared away the juniper and sagebrush up to its base. There were no rocks below it, though many projected from it. Obviously Marston had hopes of one day growing crops below it, though Jim saw no sign that a drop of water had ever fallen there. He heard at least three whistle bugs and saw a streak across the dirt that he recognized as having been left by a snake. No place, he thought, for a man raised in Philadelphia.

"We were talking right about here," said Marston, stopping a hundred and fifty feet from the ridge. "As he rode away, he was shot."

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"Where was he when he was shot?"

Without a word, Marston began walking south. Kavanagh followed him, and then Jim followed Kavanagh.

They went five hundred feet before Marston stopped and said, "Here."

They were standing the same distance from the ridge as before, but five hundred feet farther south and in an area only partially cleared of sagebrush and juniper. The earth where Marston stopped showed evidence of disturbance. It would have been the ground where Sloan fell, where Zach Riley looked for evidence after he'd loaded Sloan's body over the back of a spare horse to carry back to Bend.

"What did you see?" Kavanagh asked Marston.

"Not much. I'd gone back to work after he rode away. I heard the crack of a pistol, turned, and saw two men on horseback. One was Sloan, who fell off his horse onto the ground. The other fellow, about ten feet from him, had his hand out and a pistol in his hand. The man watched Sloan fall, then rode off."

"Which direction?"

"South."

"Did you recognize him?"

"No," said Marston. "Too far away. Just a man on a dark horse. He never looked in my direction."

"I'm surprised," said Kavanagh, "that he didn't kill you, a witness to his murder of Mr. Sloan."

"He may not have known I was here."

Jim knew that Marston wasn't the sharpest rock in the creek, but this comment seemed stupid even for him. How could the killer have not known that he was there? He'd either followed Sloan out there, or had known he would be there and had waited in ambush until after the visit to Marston was completed.

Kavanagh merely raised an eyebrow at the comment. Marston didn't see him do it. The homesteader was distracted, looking at the incomplete work at the site, doubtlessly sizing up in his own mind what still needed to be done. Jim could see satisfaction when Marston looked at the work completed—the sagebrush that he'd already hoed out and the junipers that he'd cut down—and dissatisfaction when he surveyed the remaining brush and trees. The homesteader still didn't understand, even now, that the reactions should have been reversed.

Kavanagh glanced at Jim, and then, as if as a signal, at the ground.

Jim looked at the ground. It was badly torn up, but after a

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minute he realized what Kavanagh had already seen: Horse tracks came from the direction of the house, probably Sloan's and Riley's, but none came from the north where Marston claimed he'd talked with the locator, and none went south where he'd claimed the murderer had ridden after he shot Sloan.

"Thank you, Mr. Marston," said Kavanagh, reaching over and shaking his hand. "You've been a great help to me."

"Are you done asking me questions?"

"Yes, sir, I am."

"Well," said Marston, smiling, "that wasn't so difficult."

As Kavanagh and Jim walked back to the buggy, the detective shook his head and said, "That deputy sheriff is an idiot."

"How so?"

"Didn't you see those tracks? Didn't you see where he'd been working and where he hadn't been? Didn't you hear him say that the killer apparently didn't see him? Isn't it perfectly obvious to you that William Marston is a liar?"

"Yes. But why does that mean that Zach Riley is an idiot?"

Kavanagh stopped, stunned, and stared at Jim. Jim stopped and looked back in confusion. Finally, Kavanagh chuckled, shook his head, and resumed walking toward the buggy.

"At least," said the detective, "I won't have to stay out here on the desert any longer talking to the neighboring homesteaders. I already know who the killer is."

Jim smiled at the satisfaction in Kavanagh's voice. Partly because Kavanagh was obviously one of those men who took great pride in small achievements. Partly because Kavanagh's satisfaction over having solved his case and getting to return to town early might mean a higher payment to Jim for the drive, even though he would spend less time driving him. Jim would just have to be sure that he was paid *before* Kavanagh talked to Zach Riley.

Kavanagh chuckled again. "Just like a Philadelphia man not to know that horses leave tracks on the desert."

"And just like William Marston to not learn that fact by looking at the ground," Jim said to be agreeable to his employer.

Kavanagh slapped Jim on the back and laughed.

And, back in town, Kavanagh paid Jim at the livery, and paid him well.

"Where do you think I could find that incompetent deputy at this time of day?" asked Kavanagh.

"Well, this late in the afternoon, he could be almost anywhere. He might still be at the Wall Street Saloon. That's his hangout. If there's a problem that needs his attention, that's where men go to

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fetch him, unless it's so late that he's more likely to be home."

"Why am I not surprised? How do I find the saloon from here? I'm not especially good at remembering locations in strange towns."

"I'm heading there myself, Mr. Kavanagh. I'll be pleased to guide you again, without charge."

The saloon was busier than it had been that morning, and at first Jim didn't see Riley. But he was there, at a table in the rear left corner, reading a newspaper.

Without invitation, Jim accompanied Kavanagh to the rear of the room. The detective didn't seem to mind, and Jim was powerfully curious about what Kavanagh would say. He'd been maligning Riley something fierce all the way back from Coyote Ridge.

Kavanagh marched up to Riley and without preamble said: "What I would like to know, Mr. Riley, is how you can in good conscience call yourself a deputy sheriff. I have never in my life come across a more incompetent lawman."

Jim stopped dead in his tracks, paling. Never had he imagined such a comment as that being directed at Zach Riley. He regretted his decision to accompany Kavanagh. He saw an empty table six feet away and pretended that it had been his destination all along. He hurried over and sat down.

Riley had not looked at Kavanagh, at least not noticeably. Instead he continued to act as though he were perusing the newspaper, the Portland *Oregonian*.

"How do you figure that?" Riley asked at last, still not looking beyond his paper.

"Anyone with even the slightest skill as an investigator should have been able to see instantly who had killed Charles Sloan. It was as plain as the tracks on the ground."

"I agree. Anyone could see that William Marston killed him."

For a moment Kavanagh said nothing, merely stared coldly at the grayhaired deputy. "Well, now," he said at last, "if you knew that, why did you tell me you didn't know who killed him?"

Riley lowered his newspaper and glared at Kavanagh.

"I never said any such thing," he snapped. "I only said that I hadn't made an arrest. I knew who killed him as soon as I heard Marston's story."

"Then why didn't you arrest him?" demanded Kavanagh.

"Now what sense would that have made?"

"What sense? What sense?! Well, Deputy, I don't know how things are done in Oregon, but in Minnesota when someone com-

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mits a murder the killer is usually arrested so that he can either be sent to the penitentiary or hanged. It's called punishment. Or don't you think that a killer deserves punishment?"

Riley sighed, and settled back into his chair. Jim noticed that other men near them were listening, but unlike in the morning when Kavanagh had made his dramatic entrance, most people in the saloon were unaware of the conversation. One of the waiters, Ted, came over to Jim's table and Jim held up two fingers and said, "Whiskey."

"If I didn't believe in punishing criminals," Riley was telling Kavanagh, "I wouldn't be in this job. Wouldn't want it and the sheriff wouldn't want me in it."

Jim was sure that Kavanagh knew nothing about the sheriff. If he had, he might have known that the sheriff in fact would have preferred somebody else in the job. Riley was known as a man who cut corners . . . and collected commissions.

"But sometimes doing the officially mandated thing," Riley was saying, "isn't the way to punish a fellow."

"What does that mean?"

"Well, let's look at Mr. Marston's future. He's committed a murder. By the looks of things, a cold-blooded murder. That's going to prey on his mind as long as he lives. And for what? Anger over the loss of a hundred dollars. A lot of men in this county have paid that same hundred dollars, many of them to that same locator, and a few of them more than once for two patches of sand instead of one, but they didn't murder the man. In a few years—I think it'll take that long for William Marston—it will finally dawn on him that he has wasted his time and his money and his bullet. He will have to walk away from the homestead, just like everybody else. He won't be able to sell the homestead because by that time the word will have gotten out that the Great Sandy really is a desert and not a vast meadow. He will leave behind several years of hard labor in the hot summer sun and the cold winter air. In summary, he will lose everything. All that he will have gained is a guilty conscience that will follow him to the grave."

"Of all the stupid, nonsensical—"

"Careful," said Riley in a low, cold tone. "You're very free with your words. I've been making allowances, you being a stranger here, but don't go too far."

Kavanagh fell silent.

"Now," resumed Riley, "let's say that I did arrest him. He would spend a few days in jail, probably learn from the lawyers what a

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fool he is so that after he got set free he would sell the farm to some other fool while it was still possible to sell, and other homesteaders would be saluting him the whole time as a hero for killing Sloan. Any guilt he might feel would be mitigated by the several days he served in jail and—"

"Several days!" snapped Kavanagh. "Why do you assume it will only be several days?"

"He'll be bailed out."

"But after his conviction, he'll spend years in the penitentiary—if he doesn't hang!"

Some men at a table near Jim, who had also been eavesdropping on the conversation, laughed. Kavanagh swung round to see if they were laughing at him. They didn't try to conceal the fact that they were.

"Mr. Kavanagh," said Riley, "did you observe all the so-called improvements on the desert on your way out to Marston's?"

"Yes."

"Did you talk to Marston about his life as a homesteader?"

"Yes. Also to Potter."

"Oh, you still went to see Potter, did you?"

"No. We met him on the way out."

Riley nodded. "Okay then, good. So you saw how these people have labored to create farms on the desert. You must realize, then, that Sloan was hated, and that the man who killed him would be a hero to those people. You must also realize that a great part of the population of this county is now comprised of those same homesteaders."

Again the men laughed.

Kavanagh pondered Riley's words for a minute before the thought struck him. "The homesteaders!" he said at last. "They'll comprise the jury!"

"Exactly," said Riley, smiling. "So you see, my arresting William Marston would lead to all the circumstances I've mentioned, and also be a waste of county money."

"But—"

"And there's something else for you to consider, Mr. Kavanagh. That's how your employer might feel if on your recommendation we arrested Mr. Marston and then a jury of homesteaders freed him. Not only would that produce the exact opposite result of what the railroad wants, the testimony would reveal the actual conditions on the Great Sandy and Lower Deserts. Newspapers might report that testimony if they decided it was in the public interest. The way newspapers repeat these things, it might be pub-

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lished all over the country. After it was, I think the sales of the land granted to the railroads for building their tracks to Bend would dry up pretty fast. Don't you?"

For a long time Kavanagh stood where he was, facing Riley's table, without saying or doing anything. Obviously he was trying to think of an argument to refute what Zach Riley had told him. A few chuckles came from the men nearby, but most of the people in the saloon remained oblivious to the conversation.

"So that's Marston's whole punishment?" said the detective at last. "He goes broke with all the others and has a guilty conscience—maybe—for the rest of his life. No noose, no jail, no nothing."

Kavanagh snorted, turned on his heel, and walked out of the saloon.

The men nearby laughed.

"Of course," said Riley, now addressing those men, "there's no statute of limitations on murder. Eventually you homesteaders will realize you can't farm on the desert and quit the region. That's when we can get a unbiased jury, and that's when I'll arrest Mr. Marston. And you may tell him that for me."

The men tried to laugh again but didn't quite pull it off.

Jim rose from his chair, walked over to Zach Riley, and paid him the "commission" for the driving recommendation.

Author's Note: Although the events in this story are fiction, the conditions in 1912 Central Oregon described within it, including the operations of railroad locators and the desert farming efforts of duped homesteaders, are as they actually were.

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THIEF

REBECCA RULE

I'd spotted the pink sweatshirt with glittering Santa clear across the parking lot. Slush to our ankles from snow melting. Luckily I was wearing rubbers, but she had just thin sneakers and sweatpants like wicks. I grabbed a handful of glittering Santa. "Let me go," the thief said. But I had her dead to rights. Like a bull terrier, my Frank used to say, once Bunny gets her teeth into something she snarls and bites, and she won't let go.

"Where is it?" I snarled.

She tried to twist free. Didn't do any good. The shirt stretched, but my hand was a vice, clamped tight. She slapped at me. Missed. Twice my size, but no strength in her, no conviction. Marshmallow woman. Earmuffs set crooked on her head, red-gray hair tangled in the plastic band. Her eyes filled and began to leak over pink tennis-ball cheeks.

"Listen," I said, "there's treasures in that pocketbook can't be replaced."

The sweatshirt had given her away, led me right to her. *If you're going to thief,* I thought, *you shouldn't dress so gaudy*. "Give me my pocketbook right now," I said. "Or else!"

In Bargi-Mart, I'd turned my back on my shopping cart to dig through the bin of fuzzy slippers for a pair of blue elephants with curly trunks, Beany's size. Had to dive in because the small elephants were buried under big elephants, medium elephants, ducks, dinosaurs, and bears. When I surfaced, the cart was gone and my pocketbook in the kid seat was gone too.

"Oh my Lord!" I looked up and down the aisle for Cousin Lil. "Lil?" I bleated. "Lil!" But she was across the store in Bed-and-Bath looking for a new bathroom scale because hers lied so. No Lil in sight, I hurried to the Courtesy Desk. But, wouldn't you know, this girl had sliced herself on an aluminum gutter in hardware, sliced right through her nylon stockings into her calf. "Could I

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borrow a Band-Aid?" she asked the clerk. But the clerk had no Band-Aid. Associates congregated. "Gauze?" the girl said. "How about a tissue and some duct tape?" The blood dribbled into her furry boot, wrapped like an angora cat around her foot.

"That's a nasty gash, sweetie pie," I said. "I'd offer you a hankie, but I've lost my pocketbook."

The congregation parted at the approach of the manager—said so on his name tag—who turned foam-green eyes on me and raised one black brow, thin and shapely as a woman's. "Is this where I go for lost and found?" I said.

"With you in a moment, ma'am," he said. Then, "Larry, run to cosmetics and pull some gauze, adhesive, whatever, off the shelf. Some disinfectant. A tourniquet."

Larry ran.

"Just kidding about the tourniquet," the manager said to the bleeding girl. "You're not going to pass out or anything, are you?"

"I don't think so. Is it all right if I sit down?" She sat on the tile floor, which wasn't as clean as it might have been, people tracking in and out all day through the slush.

"Someone find this young lady a chair please," the manager said.

Associates scurried.

Then to me, with a sigh, "Yes, ma'am. How can I help you?" His brows drew together to make a V, like the ones Beany draws for seagulls in his pictures of the ocean. Something about those eyebrows and the thought of Beany and my missing pocketbook full of treasures affected me. Like a big old baby about to cry, I said, damply, "The small elephants were way down the bottom of this great huge bin. I don't know how a short person is supposed to reach. Had to practically climb in, and when I finally extricated myself and got righted around, my cart was gone and so was my pocketbook!"

"That's terrible," the girl said, trying to contain the flow of blood with her fingers. She wiped them on her denim skirt, making four wet stripes.

"Maybe we should call an ambulance?" an associate offered.

"No, no, no," the girl said. "I'm fine."

"Has anybody turned in a purse in the last ten minutes?" the manager called out to associates at large.

I'd lost my money, my keys, my driver's license, and my checkbook that said where I lived, so the thief could use the house key, walk right in, terrorize the little dog, and steal everything else I owned. "It was a good-sized maroon pocketbook with a lot of compartments and my initials on the flap." Mother's celluloid

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pillbox with my blood pressure medicine was in that purse. Also a new roll of antacids, and a comb and mirror in a small plastic case.

An amplified voice rolled over us from a raised cubby behind the Courtesy Desk: "No pocketbooks turned in all morning. None whatsoever."

"What'll I do?" In that pocketbook was the smooth white stone Frank found at York Beach, Maine, in the summer of 1954 that I'd carried in a velvet pouch ever since; and the laminated keychain photo of Frank and me on our fortieth; and the wallet album with pictures of all my thirteen grandkids, including Beany, hairless from the chemo, grinning like the little imp he is. Beany's new slippers, hitched together with plastic thread, still draped my wrist. "I can't believe this," I said with a flutter of elephants that accidentally puffed the manager's chin. His brows knit, delicate as ribbons.

"Here's a chair," an associate said.

"Thank you," I said, but it wasn't for me. The associate placed the chair behind the bleeding girl. The manager lifted her into it by the armpits, her sweater mooshing up in his hands. I noticed that neither the manager nor the girl was wearing a wedding ring. *Aha!* I thought. *Those two are going to fall in love. Maybe.* I couldn't wait to tell Lil my premonition. She'd get a kick out of it. Lil devours two romance novels a week, minimum, the old mush.

The cashier from aisle eight called over. "I saw a pocketbook leave the store."

"Maroon?" I said.

"I think so," the cashier said. "It went out with a woman in a pink shirt with Christmas decorations, all sparkles. Kind of odd for February. It went just this minute out the door. I thought it was strange because she had two pocketbooks, one in the cart and one on her shoulder."

"Pink shirt?" I said.

"Glow-in-the-dark," she said. But I'd already spotted pink through the plate glass window, a neon flash, and I was headed for the door, tripping out into the slush, sun tearing my eyes, parking lot chock full, but I caught a blur of pink crossing in front of the dark windows of the liquor store, and barreled over, dodging cars, honing in. Didn't know I could move so fast in a pinch, bad hip and all. If she saw me coming, she didn't let on. Just kept walking. She ducked behind a van. I dodged around the other side and caught her wading a puddle over a plugged drain.

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"Stop right there," I said, expanding to my full height and width, which is considerable, to block her way. "You in the pink."

She tried to squeeze around me, but I grabbed a handful of that Santa shirt and wouldn't let go. She stood there at the end of my arm, limp as Raggedy Ann. "Let me go," she said. Looked like if I did let go, she'd crumple into a heap. I didn't let go. I informed her in no uncertain terms that she was going nowhere until I got my pocketbook back.

"What are you, crazy?" she said.

Crazy like a bull terrier. She tried to twist free, but not too hard, and I hung on. Stubborn runs strong in my family. It can make us miserable to live with, though Frank never said so, never dared! But it comes in handy, too, when you're fighting for your pocketbook like me, or fighting for your life like Beany. I snatched the ratty bag hanging off her elbow. The bag's strap and the elephant slippers tangled, but I wedged the bag under my chin and managed the zip with my free hand.

"That's mine," she said.

"Ha," I said, when a twenty dollar bill fell out, then a ten. I plucked out three ones creased lengthwise down the middle the way I always crease them. "What'd you do with the rest of my stuff?"

She leaned away, dead weight, as far as the shirt would stretch. I thought the sheer bulk of her might topple me, so I let go. She closed her eyes and sagged against the van, white with salt, while I dug through her stuff. I dug out a pack of Juicy Fruit, pencil stub, inhaler, a can of Baby Soft cologne rattling around with the change and mints.

But no celluloid pillbox. No checkbook. No pictures of the grandkids. No beach stone.

What now, Frank? I thought, the way I do sometimes when I'm upset even though he's long gone.

"Bunny?" It was Lil, bright-eyed and righteous with that puff of white hair like a crown. She stood behind the thief, a shopping bag in one hand, the other knotted on her hip. She filled the narrow space between the van and the station wagon. "Mercy," the old mush said, "I thought you'd left me. I thought you'd forgot and left me, and I was going to have to walk all the way home. What on earth?"

"You stand right there, Lil," I said. "Don't let this one by. She stole my pocketbook."

"No!" Lil said. Then, "That's not your pocketbook, Bunny."

"It's *her* pocketbook," I said, "with my money in it." I bent to pick a bill out of the slush. "See. I always crease my dollars just this way. This is my twenty dollar bill. This is my ten dollar bill. See."

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I tucked the money and her wallet into my coat pocket, then thrust the ratty bag back at her, pressing the inhaler into her hand, so she'd have it if she needed it. Didn't want her asphyxiating herself right here in the parking lot, at least not until I got my pocketbook back.

"Should we beat her up?" Lil said, brandishing the shopping bag. "Should I rap her a good one with my new bathroom scale?"

"I didn't steal nothin'. I didn't do nothin'," the thief said. She coughed, wiped her nose on her sleeve, sucked on her inhaler.

"Drop her with a karate chop if she tries to get away, Lil," I said. "No sense denting your new bathroom scale." Lil took Self-Defense for Seniors at the tech school. She's small but wiry and she knows all kinds of tricks.

"I wa'n't nowhere near Bargi-Mart," the thief said.

"Ha," I said. "How did you know my pocketbook was stolen out of Bargi-Mart? I never mentioned the Bargi-Mart. Did I mention the Bargi-Mart, Lil?"

"Not since I been here," Lil said.

The thief drooped and closed her eyes. She wrapped her pitifulness around herself like a blanket and disappeared inside. "I didn't steal nothin'," she said. "I didn't do nothin'."

Just then, I heard a siren in the distance, way up on North Main Street, sounded like. "Hear that?" I said. "They're coming for you." But she just stood there hugging her ratty bag, chin on her chest.

"I didn't do nothin'," she whispered.

"Are you sure, Bunny?" Lil said. "Are you sure you didn't just walk off and leave it like you do sometimes? Did you forget it in the rest room?" The siren in the distance grew louder, more distinct, musical.

"Didn't need to rest, Lil," I said. "Rested before we left the house, remember?"

"Maybe it's still in the car," Lil said. "My goodness, remember that time you kicked it under Beany's bed at the hospital and you had us looking all over at the gift shop and the lobby and the TV room, and you thought maybe you left it at Jeanie's, and the nurse finally found it an hour later under Beany's bed?"

"I had my pocketbook in Bargi-Mart," I said. "I had it in my shopping cart, and she was seen leaving the store with my pocketbook in my shopping cart! The one in the pink Santa shirt with the glitter, they said. You see anybody else around here wearing a pink glittery Santa shirt?"

"No," Lil said. Then to the thief in her retired fifth-grade-teacher

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voice: "Where is it? What did you do with Bunny's pocketbook? You give it back right now. Right now!"

"I didn't do nothin'," the thief wailed. "Nothin'."

The siren, a rising wail itself, now sounded like it was speeding along Depot Street, rounding Pet Shop Corner. I tugged the thief's wallet from my pocket, thumbed through her cards—hands shaking, knees quaking, that's how mad I was. I read the big lettering on her library card: "Mary Elsbeth Pike." The siren throbbed, an earthquake of sound coming our way, right into the parking lot one row away. "Mary Elsbeth Pike," I said, "they're coming for you."

She stepped away from the van, salted from shoulder to hip, and danced a nervous two-step like she wanted to run, but which way? At me? At Lil? Maybe throw herself over the hood of the station wagon and roll? She didn't look like she was in any shape for such acrobatics.

"My pocketbook," I said, "or else!" I smacked my fist into my palm, flailing elephants. "Oh my Lord," I said. "Beany's slippers. Lil, I never paid for them. I rushed right out of Bargi-Mart without paying. Oh my Lord, Mary Elsbeth and I might both end up in the hoosegow."

Across the parking lot, on the wide sidewalk in front of Bargi-Mart, the manager paced, coatless, hatless, up and down the expanse of concrete on the balls of his feet, rubbernecking all over for somebody, probably me, elephant thief. The ambulance siren echoed from the low, wet buildings. A cruiser wailed to a halt in front of the manager, ambulance right behind.

When Mary Elsbeth tried to squeeze between me and the station wagon, I discouraged her with a small shove, just a poke, a nudge really, but her sneaks slipped, and she plopped down in the slush on her marshmallow butt.

Pitiful.

"I'm sorry," I said, and I was. I didn't want her to hurt herself. I didn't want her to break a hip. People die from broken hips. Bending to help her up, I accidentally puffed her on the head with the elephants which tangled with her pink earmuffs. "Ow," she said.

Lil said, "You're pulling her hair right out by the roots, Bunny. Careful. You're all tangled up."

Mary Elsbeth struggled to her feet, elephants and earmuffs hanging off her head, tennis-ball cheeks flushed red, wet and salty as the rest of her. "In the trash barrel in front of the liquor store," she said without looking me in the eye. "I think I saw

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somebody stick a pocketbook in that trash barrel."

"My goodness," Lil said, disentangling elephants and muffs. "You're soaked to the bone."

"She pushed me down," Mary Elsbeth said.

"I didn't mean to," I said.

"She pushed me right down."

"I said I was sorry."

"I'm sorry too," she said.

I could see that she was. Sorry she got caught!

"You stay here," I said. "Lil, watch her!"

At the trash barrel in front of the liquor store, sure enough, when I raised the flap and reached through, the first thing my fingers touched, thank God, was the familiar vinyl and raised gold lettering of my maroon pocketbook. I pulled it out, pawed through to make sure everything was intact—keys, checkbook, photo album, pillbox—then waved to Lil. Triumphant. She waved back. By then, God bless her thieving heart, Mary Elsbeth was halfway to Shop 'n Save, picking up speed, but I didn't care, as long as I had my pocketbook back.

Over at Bargi-Mart, paramedics had strapped the bleeding girl onto a stretcher and were rolling her through the automatic doors. The manager walked beside her. He wasn't holding her hand, but I could see he would have liked to. She was a pretty girl and plucky. Obviously, she'd bled her way into his lonely heart. "It's nothing," she said. "It's really nothing. Look, I'm hardly bleeding at all anymore."

"You just lay still," he said, "and let these people take care of you."

"Excuse me," I said to the manager, "I accidentally stole these slippers, but I'm going to go back in and pay for them because, you'll be happy to know, I located my pocketbook."

"Isn't that lucky," the bleeding girl said as they slid her into the ambulance. I wondered if they were taking her to Beany's hospital. Probably. If so, maybe we'd run into her over there.

In the car, Lil said, "She'll be fine."

"They'll fix her right up," I said. "A few stitches, tetanus shot, what have you. She'll be all set."

"He's smitten," Lil said, "that young man. The manager with the pretty eyes. Don't you think?" She's such an old mush. I didn't answer her because I was up to my elbow in my pocketbook, groping for keys. Finally located them, but in the process realized I couldn't feel the velvet pouch with the smooth beach stone in its usual place. "Oh no," I said, digging frantically

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through the uncharted depths of the middle compartment.

"What's wrong?" Lil said.

"My special stone," I said. "I can't find it."

"That's all right, Bunny," Lil said. "How 'bout we drive to the beach and get you another one."

Not the same, I thought. *Not Frank's; not the stone Frank found special for me at York Beach, Maine, in 1954.*

Then I touched it, the velvet bag. I felt the shape and weight of the stone inside. Then I had it safe in my hand.

"Whew," I said. "For a minute I thought we were going to have to turn that trash barrel out on the sidewalk and pick through."

I opened the pouch, held out my hand, palm up, and let the stone fall into it. I let it roll cool and healing over my winter-chapped skin: my lucky stone, a perfect stone, a stone as smooth and round as Beany's dear little bald head.

We'd like to know what your favorite AHMM stories are

In anticipation of our fiftieth anniversary in 2006, we are asking our readers, especially our long-time subscribers, to tell us what stories over the years were the most memorable, captivating, enjoyable, or otherwise remarkable. We also invite you to contribute your comments about the stories you've particularly liked.

We'll print some of the stories from your suggestions as Mystery Classics during our anniversary year. We'll also run a selected list in the magazine, including some of your comments.

Please write to: The Editors
Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine
475 Park Avenue South
New York, New York 10016

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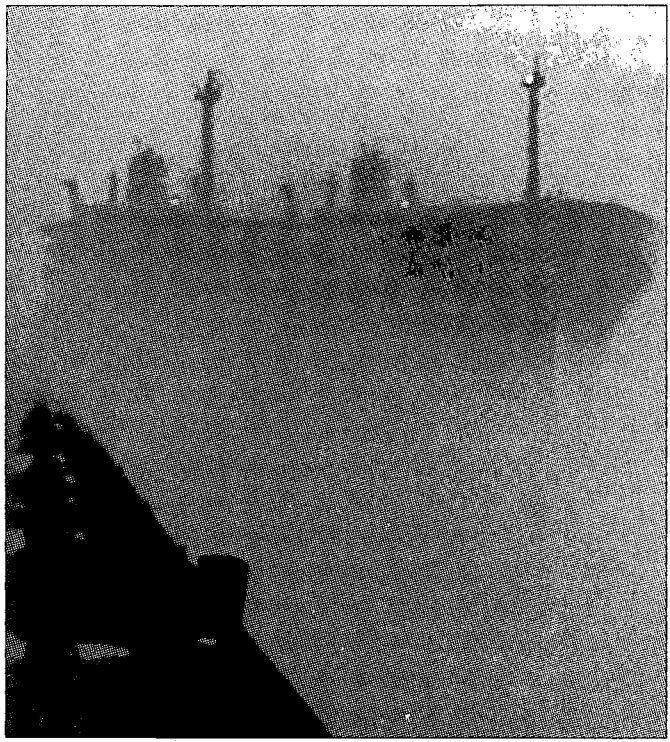
Mysterious Photograph



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Ghost Ship

We will give a prize of $25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime) based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to AHMM, Dell Magazines, 475 Park Avenue South, New York, New York 10016. Please label your entry "June Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit. If possible, please also include your Social Security number.

The winning entry for the December Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 141.

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All That Glitters

K. J. A. WISHNIA

No one lies on their deathbed and says, "I should have watched more television."

My great Aunt Celia never saw a television until she came down from the Ecuadorian mountains in the mid-1970s. She sat in our unheated home, wrapped in her stiff woolen shawl, the room dark except for the glowing glass screen before us, as the newsreaders told us how a flooded section of highway had given way and sent a busload of *cristianos* plunging into a ravine. She watched silently, then cautiously leaned over to me and whispered, "Can they see us?"

I tried to explain that they couldn't.

"But they're looking right at us."

Then one day she left the mud-walled village and followed my wayward cousins to the U.S. where she beheld many more wonders until, after eighty-four summers of service, that wondrous heart stopped beating.

That was three days ago, and the black-bordered card staring up at me from between the shaggy piles of white papers on my desk informs me that the funeral mass is at two P.M. today at Our Lady of Sorrows in Corona, followed by burial services at St. Mary's Cemetery in a neighborhood some overconfident pioneers were audacious enough to name Utopia.

I'm remembering the special flavors of Aunt Celia's kitchen, especially her *sopa de pollo*, which had a unique taste that is still unmatched despite all my attempts to reproduce it. I'm lost in a hazy reverie of olfactory sensations when the third button on my phone starts blinking and my boss hails me from the corner office.

"Fil, pick up!"

"Sure, whadaya got for me, Chip?"

"I'm trying to reach that customs guy in Puerto Rico and

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nobody in the freaking place speaks any English," Chip shouts back at me.

"Sure they do. They're probably just playing with you. *¿Allo?*"

"*¿Sí? ¿Con quién hablo?*" says the guy. I can hear metallic banging in the background, and I can just picture the guy wearing oil-stained coveralls, holding a socket wrench in his hand.

I tell him that I'm calling from Davis and Brown Investigations in New York, and that we're looking for a customs agent named Wilson Ortega.

"You got the wrong number," he tells me in Spanish. "This is a garage."

I thank him, hang up, and go tell Chip.

"Must be a chop shop," he says, not realizing how many car repair shops there are in San Juan.

"Just sounded like a garage to me, Chip. But you never know," I add, wondering if there's a subtle prejudice behind his response.

But Chip is already punching the hold button: "Mr. Theodorakis? My Spanish-speaking investigator is with me and she says you were given the wrong number," he says, crossing the number off his heavily scribbled legal pad with a thick pencil and waving me out of the office.

I stare at the papers on my desk for a few blank moments, trying to recover the special smells of my great aunt's kitchen. But they are gone, dissipated by the air currents of time and responsibilities. I start going through the easy pile, mechanically putting papers in the right folders, filing reports where they belong and recycling old memos, and wondering if anyone else can hear the giant whoooooshing sound as all the joy of being alive gets sucked out of me, leaving an icy whirlpool of survivor's guilt rushing through my chest.

I'm thinking that in Ecuador, cats have seven lives, and here they have nine—so where I come from, even the cats have it harder—when I look up and see a man standing a few feet in front of my desk. He's in his midfifties, with waxy skin sagging like sallow candle drippings and heavy bags of sleeplessness hanging from his eyes. He's wearing a long, dark winter coat and a thick fedora with a trace of shiny black yarmulke showing underneath.

"Miss Buscarsela?"

"Yes." I don't correct him with a "Ms."

"I'm Louis Koppelman. The architect. Mr. Davis said that you would help me."

"Nice to meet you, Mr. Koppelman." I extend my hand toward

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him, where it hangs for a second, before I divert it to the seat. "Sit down and take your coat off."

He looks the chair over before lowering himself into it with a tired sigh and takes his hat off, revealing a wavy mat of black hair and a yarmulke clipped in place.

"It's my mother," he says.

"Wait, I need to get the details—" I say, reaching for a pad and pen.

"She's dead."

Two syllables that stop the clock in its tracks.

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"Are you? Really?"

"Yes. There's no way to fill a hole like that."

He can hear the ring of geniune emotion in my voice, I guess, because he stops staring into the space between us and makes eye contact.

"Yes. That's it," he agrees. "A hole that will never be filled."

I nod. Nothing else gets said for a few seconds.

"Go on," I say. "Tell me about your problem."

"All right. Her name—my mother's name—was Laura Koppelman."

I write this down.

"She died of cancer. It started in her throat and spread to her chest. In less than three months, she was gone. Just like that."

"I bet she had a helluva good recipe for chicken soup, too."

He raises an eyebrow at my non-businesslike comment. Then he nods. "Yes, she put something special in it. I always thought it was the fresh dill, but I can't get it to come out the same way, not like hers—"

He stops as if one more word will crack open the thin layer of ice damming up his tears. I feel a surge of wetness rise to the rims of my eyes, as well.

I'm the one who finds my voice first. "So—um—what can I do for you as a private investigator?"

"Where do I start? My mother gave everything to us. And we're a big family. There's me, my three brothers, and two sisters. She never worked a day outside the home when we were kids. Very traditional. But after we went to college and the girls got married off, she decided to go out and get a job. Something that, you know, she enjoyed doing. With a lot of stylish people coming and going. So she took a job in the fur trade, then after six months she switched to the jewelry business. She worked a long time for the same establishment."

"How many years?" I ask.

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"Eighteen years. They gave her a pair of diamond earrings and a gold necklace as a retirement present."

"Wish I had a boss like that."

"No, you don't. He was also a chain-smoker who refused to ventilate the place properly."

Ah. I think I see where this is going.

"So you want us to find evidence suggesting that unhealthy work conditions contributed to her demise—"

He eyes me coldly as I slip into unfeeling bureaucratese.

I correct myself: "That secondhand smoke may have caused her death."

"Yes. It won't bring her back. But . . ."

"I understand. Where did she work?"

"Czernowitz Jewellers. In the diamond district. You know, West Forty-seventh Street?"

"Yes, I've heard of it."

Chip wants me to hop the subway into Manhattan right away, but I don't feel like beating the bricks along West Forty-seventh Street in this chilly weather.

"Too freaking bad," is his answer.

"Why me? Why don't you send Mitchell or Hrabowski?"

"Because you're the one with the Jewish boyfriend."

"So that makes me an expert on the diamond trade?"

"Get dispensation from the Pope and do it," comes the order.

Five minutes later I'm calling Dr. Stanley "my Jewish boyfriend" Wrenchowski at L.I.J. Hospital and asking him what I have to do to pass for an upper-middle-class Orthodox housewife.

"Well, first of all, I wouldn't go all the way to Orthodox, Fil. You better stick with Conservative."

"Why?"

"Because I don't think you could pull off Orthodox."

"I'm not going there for a ritual bath, Stan, I'm just going to have a look at the place. What's the matter? Don't you trust my role-playing skills?"

"Okay, okay. You're a master of disguise. But if you're going to try to pass as Orthodox, remember—you can't touch any male over thirteen. Or sing. Or show your hair."

"Why not?"

"Because it's erotic."

"Oh yeah, my hair's so charged with erotic power the hairband hasn't been made that can contain its frizziness."

"Stop. You're making me crazy."

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"Stan, just help me out here. What's a good name for a Jewish gal?"

"With your coloring, you should try for something Sephardic. How about Hadassah?"

"Hadassah?"

"Sure. Senator Weinberg's wife is named Hadassah."

"What's her sister's name? American Jewish Congress?"

Whoever said April is the cruellest month never did January in New York. The harsh, Arctic-fed wind kicks up dirt and shredded plastic bags as I, in the person of Hadassah Cardozo, make my way along the sparkling storefronts of the diamond district deep in the canyons below Rockefeller Center.

All that glitter cuts through the cold air, refracting the midwinter sun into a thousand laser-like darts of rainbow-colored light. Since modern anthropologists have convincingly demonstrated that all humans, from Iceland to Tasmania, originally came from Africa, you've got to ask yourself, *Why on earth did we leave?* A nice African savannah sounds pretty good right about now, especially after watching the high-fashioned ladies stepping out of double-parked limos and strutting around in clothes so shiny and asymmetrical and useless they look like they were designed by Edith Head's brother, Dick. This season's fashion statement seems to be: We'll go to our lonely deaths—but looking *really* sharp.

I pass the lone antiquarian bookstore on a block dedicated to diamonds, with the twenty-four-hour picture frame shop on the second floor. Screw the company, I'm doing some window shopping. That's what they get for sending me out here on a day like this.

Looking at the high-priced hardcovers in the store window reminds me of a case a few months ago where I had to punk out a sleazy book dealer who was passing off forged goods as mint condition rarities. Let me just say, as a public service, that you should be very suspicious of anyone who tells you that they have a signed first edition of Kafka's *The Trial*.

I move on, strolling past a window display that's got to cost a million dollars a foot. Yard after yard of diamond-studded Stars of David, menorahs, heart-shaped pendants, medallions, eye-in-the-palm fertility and Chai symbols, even a humidity monitor in the corner to make sure all that ice stays nice and fresh.

As I watch all these well-to-do Jewish men servicing the top one percent of society's economic ladder, an uncomfortable thought edges its way into my psyche. I know that this is an unrepresentative sample, but the way they all look to me, with their long, curly, black beards and their white shirts, black pants, black vests, and

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black yarmulkes, dressed in the uniform of perpetual mourning for their exile from the Promised Land, I can't help thinking that they all look like escapees from the Museum of Ethnic Stereotypes. Economically powerful, weirdly dressed Jews, big noses and all, as if drawn from some Nazi-era propaganda posters.

Of course, the stereotype of the *latino* as a slick-haired, leather-jacketed, switchblade-toting *vato* from East L.A. is alive and well in reality and on TV, but nobody ever dedicated a nation's total resources to annihilating us.

I guess I shouldn't complain. When put in that perspective, things are good. There are no hordes of Cossacks swarming across eastern Suffolk County, burning houses and raping women as they head toward the city, but—*ach*—troubles we have enough, I think to myself as I start to get into character.

I've got a pinhole-lens video camera concealed in a pager at waist level. I'd rather work with eye-level video, which gives me a lot more control over what gets recorded. Belt buckle–mounted units tend to give you a shaky, silkworm's-eye-view of things, but the eyeglass and tie clip units were signed out on priority cases and I have to be back in Queens by two P.M.

I activate the recording unit, tell the wind what day and time it is, pass three more glistening storefronts and push open the cold metal door to Czernowitz Jewellers.

I don't need a portable air sampler to tell me the place is full of carcinogens. The elderly man behind the counter has a three-inch cigar parked in his mouth and a patch of ash spotting his black vest. The ashtray on the glass counter overflows with dead butts like a lifeboat full of shipwrecked survivors, and a thick curtain of blue-gray smoke hangs a foot below the low ceiling, its shadowy wisps hungrily clawing for my tender air sacs.

Otherwise, the layout is as sterile as a suburban doctor's office—and actually, a blood pressure monitor wouldn't be a bad idea in here. The old guy's silk-embroidered shirt barely engulfs the wiggling fat of his arms as he strains, bending slightly to lift a tray of sparkling diamond rings from the thigh-level shelf in the primary display case. He gently places the tray in front of two well-dressed women, and turns to cough up something far less glamorous into a plastic-lined wastebasket on the floor.

I aim the camera at the scene for a few minutes while the two women discuss the aesthetic merits of beryl versus amethyst accents. A group of out-of-towners comes in and they gape at the wall-to-wall tinsel. They want to look at the low-end silver chains and pendants with tiny diamond inlays. Three of them leave

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before the man behind the counter turns to me, his face jovial and open. "How may I help you?"

"Thanks, I'm just looking. Besides, you're busy."

"Busy? I'm busy in diamonds like Picasso was busy with paint. Maybe some nice earrings?" he says, turning back to the two women, but they're not ready to make the leap.

Some homies in dark North Face jackets wander in to check out the goods, smiling at the brightly cut facets. They get the same courteous treatment I got.

It's time to go. I've got enough tape of this guy smoking and coughing up boogers to help make my client's case. I'm about to leave, when I realize that it's not enough to show this guy chomping on the end of a dead stogie. This is about a woman's life. I want to see how soon he lights another.

He's got his own version of a Wall of Fame going in the narrow space between two upright display cases. There are some interesting discoveries among them, like Lisa Kudrow and Goldie Hawn, for instance. But Moshe Dayan is Jewish? Who knew?

"See ya later, Pops," says one of the homies, as they bounce out the door, and the tourists see their chance to bail and grab it.

"Come back soon," the old man calls after them. "Looking is free."

He turns to me again. Time to try out my rudimentary Yiddish.

"Vos makht ir, reb Czernovitz?"

"Men hot parnose," he says. "Business could be better, and you speak with a German accent, *chaverte."*

"Oh, really? Well, that's because my parents spoke Ladino. I'm only just learning Yiddish from my boyfriend." Brilliant save. Applause from the back bench.

"Well, he's obviously Americanized," he declares, accurately.

"But you are Mr. Czernowitz?" I repeat for the benefit of the tape.

"Dos bin ikh," he says, spreading his hands a little. "And this boyfriend of yours? Is he ready for a diamond ring yet?"

I smile and avert my eyes.

"Ahh," he says, happily chalking up another point on an invisible tradesman's chart. "I can always tell."

I look across the wide, bustling street and catch a glimpse of the twenty-four-hour frame shop in a store window.

"When was the last time you needed a picture framed at three A.M.?" I say to myself as much as to him.

"This is the city that never sleeps," he says with an upbeat intonation that's strictly for the tourist trade. "Except for us, right?"

I look at him.

"You mean closing early for *shabbes?"*

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"Of course, *shabbes*. And *Erev Tu B'Shevat*."

Erev Tu B'Shevat. Yes, this is a test. Christ, I know all of the big ones—Pesach, Sukkoth, Rosh Hashanah and the rest—but *Erev Tu B'Shevat*? What the heck is that?

"Right," I say, blankly.

He's all smiles. Then he lights another cheroot and—bingo—I get my money shot.

"What's *Erev Tu B'Shevat?*"

"The eve of *Tu B'Shevat*," Stan says.

"Right. What's *Tu B'Shevat?*"

"I have no freaking idea."

We're driving through the part of Queens that's nothing but power plants and cemeteries.

"Some source for all things Jewish you turned out to be," I say.

"Give me a break, Fil. You know my parents raised me on classic routines from the comedy team of Marx and Engels. That diamond district We Are The Chosen People thing is about as far from my edge of the Jewish universe as you can get. We're not all one type."

"I know that."

"You know where people get that idea from?"

I'm about to say, sure, anti-Semitic propaganda—

"It's all Captain Kirk's fault."

"Come on, Stan. Every trekker knows that Kirk and Spock are Jewish."

"Look, I know you're a fan, but you've got to admit that your beloved *Star Trek* has been projecting subtle racial stereotypes for years. Think about it. All those alien species that have one defining trait—you know, the Vulcans are all logical and unemotional, the Ferengi are all profit-driven wheeler-dealers—"

"I see what you mean. They all have one identifying racial characteristic."

"Like there're no gay Klingons who aren't into that whole warrior thing. Anyway, it's just that guys like that jeweler are much more visible than I am—"

"Watch the traffic cones."

"I see them. I mean, as far as I'm concerned, Jesus was a radical socialist rabbi from upper Judea who challenged the system and died for his beliefs. It wouldn't be the first time it's happened. But you guys had to go spreading His word across the whole damn continent."

"It pays to advertise."

"It sure does. I mean, how come you always have all these

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weirdos claiming to be Jesus—Charles Manson, David Koresh—but nobody ever claims to be Moses? That's because he was too human, he made real mistakes. He killed a man in anger and ran away because he couldn't face the consequences. Then he tried to back out of his obligations to the Lord. He even pissed off his family by marrying a dark-skinned Kushite woman."

"So you're saying that the image of Jesus as perfect actually makes it easier for false prophets to convince gullible people that they're Him."

"It's not so weird, Fil. You know how criminals think: The punishment's the same for stealing a couple thousand dollars as it is for stealing a couple million, so you might as well go for the big money. And that's how you become Americanized."

"By stealing a few million dollars?"

"By buying into our system." He swerves into the left lane to pass a shiny red sports car that is inexplicably refusing to exceed the speed limit.

"And bowing before the altar of mammon like this schmuck is doing," he says, jerking a thumb at the scarlet-enameled prize.

"You mean worshiping money."

"Yeah. Consumerism is our established religion, and if you don't buy into it, they chuck you out of the temple."

We exit the highway and play dodge-the-pedestrian on the winding streets of Jamaica so I can drop the video gear off at the office and get myself a gold star for it. When I come back to the car, Stan's double parked, putting on his tie in the rearview mirror. He wraps the wide end around the narrow one, making four complete circuits.

"My homage to the glorious House of Windsor," he admits.

"Yeah, how many families have a knot named after them?"

The spotlights high above illuminate the silver wine cup in the priest's hand, making it glow like liquid fire as he holds the wafer above the chalice and says a prayer for the departed soul of my great Aunt Celia Espinoza.

I see all the faces, hug all the cousins. Then we get back on the highway and head east in silence. The first piece of land you encounter upon leaving Utopia is a cemetery, then a golf course, then another cemetery.

The ground is cold and hard. They had to use a backhoe to open up our Mother Earth. Treadmarks score her grass-and-dirt-covered arms.

"We are gathered here . . ."

The ritual rhythms of the words drone on and on, seeming to stop

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for a moment because there is an amazing sunset—unmatchable yellow-white brilliance at the center of a wash of orange splashing the trees and gilding each bare branch like in some wine commercial or movie where the second unit spent a week setting up a shot like this, but no one in the picture even notices or comments on it. Well, we sure notice it. And in a few moments, it's gone. This moment has passed, but it lives on in us.

". . . beloved mother, cherished aunt . . ."

Within seconds the sun fades to a bright yellow disk, as if God had taken a big hole punch and poked a hole through the sky to let in a bit of heavenly light and then, in another few moments, it slips below the horizon, flat as a gold-rimmed dinner plate. And the dying light strikes the ribbed clouds drifting in with a pastel rose, like a celestial washboard.

The roads are jammed, but nobody is actually getting anywhere yet. My family has come from as far as Florida and Ecuador, and I haven't seen some of them in a long time. On Christmas Eve in Cuenca, Ecuador, when we all used to live there, we'd fill a whole church by ourselves. Now our motorcade is crawling through rush-hour traffic, and I can't wait to talk to them all at my cousin Rosalie's place.

Stan reaches over and turns on the radio.

"Mi khamokha baylim, Adonai?
Mi khamokha nedar bakodesh—"

Ah, New York, where you can get Jewish liturgy on WQXR on Friday evenings, live from Temple Emanu-El in Manhattan.

"It gets dark so quickly this time of year," I observe.

"Oh? You ready to start talking again?"

"Yeah."

"Good. 'Cause I was getting tired of staring into the blackness of death all by myself here."

"Sorry. Is it that bad? Am I being that difficult?"

"You tell me. Am I going to fit in at this thing?"

"You'll be fine."

"Because let me tell you, I've been to those Italian weddings where the bridesmaids are all chewing gum, smoking, and drinking longneck beers with the other hand. And that's during the ceremony. You should see them at the party."

"Don't worry, we stopped subjecting outsiders to the cruel bloodletting rites several years ago."

"Ki sheyshet yamim asah Adonai
Et ha'shamayim v'et ha'erets—"

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"This is a nice area," I say.

"Yeah, I just love passing through a neighborhood where people are throwing out stuff that's better than what we have in our apartment."

"Uvayom hashvi'i, uvayom hashvi'i,
Shabbes vayi-nafash."

"What is this, Stan? The antidote to all those hymns?"

"Let's just say that I'm not one of those people who associates the Gregorian chants of medieval Christianity with boundless benevolence."

"Okay, bad example."

"Yeah, let's pick another century."

I stare out the window as we crawl onto the Long Island Expressway. We're doing about ten miles an hour when our headlights sweep past a sign that says:

LITTER REMOVAL NEXT MILE
BY
CHIPPENDALE'S

Ooh, now I'm psyched. I fully expect to see an exotic dancer picking up litter in full bowtie-and-beefcake regalia.

So where the hell is he?

My cousin Rosalie's apartment on Woodside Avenue has an unobstructed view of both the LIRR tracks and the elevated number 7 train, and it was never meant to hold this many people. The Mendez cousins on my father's side are over by the food, the little ones with their straight black mop tops and wooden-bowl haircuts, the adults having gone to great lengths to thicken and tease up their "Jivaro" hair. My cousin Ruthie is here with her crew, representing the Espinozas and waiting for the night to begin.

My Aunt Estrella—Ruthie's mom and the new matriarch of my mother's side of the family—comes around offering slabs of Ecuadorian cheese laid out on a tray like dotless dominoes and tiny oblong coffin lids.

"Cómete algo, Mena," she insists, leading us to the food-covered table of plenty.

"Por supuesto. Gracias, tía."

"What is that stuff?" Stan whispers.

"Looks like fried chicken, fried rice, and fried yucca," I tell him. "We were trying to think of a way to fry the salad, too, but the lettuce kept dissolving."

I spot my cousin Lucas over by the guacamole, busily chatting up

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his sister-in-law's kid sister, Paloma, and turn to avoid eye contact with the black sheep of the family. I know it's a cliché, but what else are you going to call a guy who steals from his own sisters, including Rosalie, a divorced mom with three kids? Every family's got one, right?

"Where is Uncle Mateo?" I ask.

"They wouldn't give him a visa," says Aunt Estrella.

"Wouldn't give him a visa? He's seventy-two years old! What do they think he's going to do, take jobs away from geriatric Americans?"

"I told him to call you," she says. "I told him you know how to fix things on a computer."

"I can use one to write him a letter of support for the INS, if that's what you mean, but I couldn't hack into their files and get away with it."

"What's this world coming to?" she laments. "Pretty soon you'll be able to get pictures of people having sex on your computer!"

"Uh, you already can—"

"Yes, I ask you, what's this world coming to?" she says, shaking her head and walking away.

I follow her into the bedroom to comfort her as best I can. We sit on the polyester bedspread, and I tell her how my teenage daughter, Antonia, is doing, and that, on the subject of computers, she once knew more about PCs than I did. I still remember her tiny four-year-old hands manipulating the mouse better than I could at the time. I don't tell her how Antonia's starting to prefer Stan's Reform temple to my church just because they have cushions on the seats, or how some of the white kids try to torment her by calling her "Pocahontas."

"It's okay to cry, *tía.*"

"There used to be eight of us," she says.

"I know."

"Including your mother, God rest her soul."

"Yes. She was so young . . ."

"Todo depende de Dios." It all depends on God.

"Sí. Es el único."

Then she gets off the bed and hobbles over to the dresser, where she has set up a makeshift shrine to her sister with two candles on either side of a yellowing photo of Aunt Celia when she was a strong, handsome woman, back in the 1950s. She opens a big box of kitchen matches and takes out a thick wooden match. Fingers shaking, she strikes twice before getting a spark, then raises the sputtering flame to light the twin candles. She blows out the match,

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lays it aside, and covers her eyes with her palms. I draw near, ready to put my hands on her shoulders to steady her, when her palms fall away from her dry eyes and she turns to go, leaving the candles lit.

Stan steps aside to let her pass.

"Has she ever done that before?" he asks.

"Done what?"

"Lit a pair of candles on Friday night."

"Oh. I guess so. I haven't lived with the Espinozas since I was a kid."

"Well, it's just that that's a Jewish ritual, lighting the *shabbes* candles."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean—well, it depends. Is she doing it because it's your aunt's wake, or does she do this every Friday night?"

"I guess I remember her doing it back in the old days, now that I think of it. But she never made a big deal out of it or anything."

"Hmm."

"Hmm—what?"

"Have you ever heard of the Marranos?"

"The word sounds familiar. What about it? Give it to me straight, Doctor."

"Okay." He leans against the vanity, his back to the mirror, and addresses me as if I were a group of med students. "In 1492, the same year everyone else celebrates as a year of discovery, Ferdinand and Isabella gave the Jews in Spain three choices: convert, be expelled from the country, or die. A lot of them converted and started going to mass every Sunday, while secretly continuing to practice their religion. They were known as crypto-Jews, or Marranos. A bunch of them emigrated to South America seeking a little freedom from religious persecution—fat chance—and where, over the centuries, they forgot who they were."

"Wait a minute. You're saying I'm Jewish?"

"Well, part-Jewish, anyway. Where do you think you got that frizzy hair from? Your cousins on your dad's side all have that straight Inca hair."

"I always thought it was a bit of Black Africa in the blood, by way of the Caribbean coastline."

"That too, yeah. I've met your extended family in Guayaquil. Damn, Filomena—you embody the Diaspora all by yourself."

"Hot damn. Open the champagne."

"But I've got to tell you, Espinoza is just Spanish for Spinoza, and as philosophers go, he was as Jewish as they come."

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"Yo, Fil, Koppelman's lawyer called to say the video's not enough to demonstrate liability for his client's cancer," Chip tells me. "I need you to go back and get an air sample."

"Could be a problem with that. Most air samplers are tripod-mounted canisters that need to run for a few days, and the smaller ones are designed to indicate the presence of volatile organics, not passive cigarette smoke. Unless you want me to dress up as a cleaning woman and go in there with the sampler disguised as a vacuum cleaner—"

"We could probably sneak you onto the custodial staff at Bloomingdale's, but not a tiny shop like that." He scratches his chin. "So now what?"

"We could try tracking down some of the former employees of Czernowitz Jewellers and find out if any of them have developed similar symptoms."

He snaps his fingers and shoots his index at me. "Get right on it."

"You want me to have his lawyer subpoena the employment records?"

"Nah. That'd only put him wise to our game plan, and he'd shred the stuff before we ever saw it. We need the goods on this guy by Monday. You better head back to Forty-seventh Street and get me some answers the old-fashioned way."

"I can't. It's Saturday."

He looks at me.

"All the shops are owned by Orthodox Jews. They're closed on Saturday."

"They open Sunday?"

"Yeah, but—" I don't like where this is going.

"So do it tomorrow."

I open my mouth to protest.

"Half day," he says, walking back to his office.

Great. Working on *both* sabbaths. If I'm really Catholic and part Jewish, then I'm sure getting the worst of both worlds here. But if Chip's going to make me log the hours, I'm going to do some investigating for myself. First I need to get some business out of the way. I make some calls trying to dig up character witnesses for a harmless old loon who was dragged in by the cops after he downed a fifth of Rumpleminze and tried to hijack the Eighth Avenue local to Cuba. In the current climate, fear of terrorism could inflate that into a federal crime, and we're trying to get it dropped to a simple case of drunk and disorderly.

Then I call Aunt Estrella, who tells me that the women in the family have been lighting candles on Friday night for as long as

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she can remember, but she doesn't know how the tradition got started, or anything else about it. I call the rest of my relatives on the Espinoza side, with the same results. I spend over an hour investigating my own genealogy on the Internet, trying to find out who I really am and what I'm made of, with no luck. Did I really expect to find reliable or accurate records dating back five hundred years in cyberspace?

Time to go to a real source.

"This explains why some kids didn't talk to me, and the dirty looks we got even in my hometown. They knew something was different about us. Why didn't anybody tell me? What does it mean?"

"It means they almost succeeded in erasing your history," the rabbi answers.

Rabbi Kushner is a healthy fifty-five, with a closely trimmed beard and a few gray hairs to show his age and wisdom. He's Reform, of course.

"And it all comes down to frizzy hair?"

"This generation doesn't do it as much anymore, but the struggle for assimilation used to include nose jobs, ironing your hair, losing the accent, and changing your name from Weinstein to Winston."

"And all those cut-off parts are probably waiting for us when we get to heaven."

"I wouldn't know about that," he says, with a good-natured smile.

I look around his office at the diplomas, awards, and commemorative plaques, many in parallel text English and Hebrew, including two terra cotta tablets of the Ten Commandments hanging above his Macintosh computer.

My turn to joke: " 'Thou shalt not kill?' Oh. Why didn't anyone tell me? Too bad you guys aren't authorized to hear confessions."

He chuckles. "Actually, I've got my own confession to make."

"What's that?"

He checks his watch, and leans forward.

"Just between us, I used to envy the Catholic sacrament of penance. The idea that by openly confessing your sins and saying a few quick penitential prayers you could walk away free and clear was very appealing to me as a young man."

"Don't Jews have a similar ritual during the High Holy Days?"

"Sure, once a year. Our Catholic brethren perform that service any day of the week."

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"Redemption-on-demand: that's our specialty, all right."

"But I once heard Rabbi Fishman at Temple Beth Sholom give a sermon about how for Jews, the idea of sin and redemption is a lot more complicated than it is for most Christians."

"Imagine that. What a shocker."

"He said our souls are like diamonds, and sin is like a scratch on the diamond. You can't erase it and go back to a pristine state. But you can take that scratch and turn it into something else, make a pretty pattern out of it, something that isn't an obvious flaw. More of a reminder that you can redesign yourself and resolve to do better in the future. But you can never wipe the flaws in the diamond completely clean."

"You know, I really feel an affinity for that way of thinking," I say, nodding.

"Welcome to the wonderful world of moral ambiguity."

"Just one more question, Rabbi."

"Sure."

"What the heck is *Tu B'Shevat?*"

It's bright and chilly on this strange Sunday, the streets eerily quiet, and I'm out here staring at menorah-shaped pendants, wondering if I should be wearing one—at least one day a week, anyway—instead of my cross of Ecuadorian gold. But it's time to get down to business.

I've been asking around the diamond shops, figuring that it's a small enough enclave, and that people probably have a pretty good idea who's been working for who. I walk into the ninth place so far today, ready to flash my private investigator's license and lay out the scam that I am trying to trace a distant relative about a matter regarding an inheritance—which is kind of true, in a twisted way.

But for some reason I keep being drawn to the menorah-shaped pendants.

"See something you like?" says the man behind the counter. He's young and pale, with a black beard and sidelocks.

"Yes, I really like the Tree of Life motif, the ones with the seven branches symbolizing the days of creation."

He examines me from head to foot. I'm not Hadassah Cardozo today.

"Yes, that is a popular one," he says tonelessly.

I lean over for a closer look at them, marveling at the undulating bark and the divinely intermingling branches. As good an image as any of God's creation. I kneel down to look at the array of golden trees on the bottom shelf. Then I see a pint-sized metal

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box with a tiny indicator screen behind the display. It's not a humidity meter.

"Is that a motion detector?" I ask.

"No, it's a Mo*town* detector. It can detect Motown music within a five hundred–yard radius."

It takes a second, then a giggle bubbles up my throat like a can of soda that somebody shook before opening.

"What's the matter, you didn't think I had a sense of humor?" he says.

"No. I would never think that."

His dark eyes roll up to the ceiling.

"Well, maybe a little—" I admit.

"It's just slow on Sundays. I get bored with the same old routine."

"Seriously?"

"Seriously."

"Okay. So what's with the box?"

His eyes flit from wall to wall. I've got a sudden urge to reach for the bug spray.

"Hey, you said it was a slow day. Come on, tell me."

"Well, some people say it's an urban legend," he begins. "About some gold that was stolen from a hospital upstate back in the midthirties, and it never turned up."

I wait a moment. "So what about it?"

"Well, some people say it did turn up, in Buffalo, mostly in high school class rings during the nineteen forties."

Another moment. "And?"

"And—well—the thieves didn't know. If you're not trained, you have no idea what you're dealing with."

Shorter moment. "So what were they dealing with? And don't say *well* again."

"Wel—I mean, that it wasn't an ordinary shipment of gold. It was a box of radium-tipped needles for surgical use. You know, for treating cancer."

"Did they do that back in the thirties?"

"I guess so. Anyway, the thing is that the gold is supposed to be radioactive. So some especially cautious jewelry shop owners like to keep a Geiger counter around, just in case a bit of it ever comes back to bite us."

"You mean that thing's on right now?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Has it ever picked up anything?"

"Not on my shift."

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"I see. Thanks."

"Don't mention it."

And I walk out of there, my mind aswirl.

I make some calls. By miracle, I find the right people. My friend Gina at the EPA is spending this glorious Sunday morning at home with her two toddlers. She shares some frantic working-mother moments with me, then connects me to a medical caseworker, who calls another caseworker, who hooks me up with a woman who has just survived a piece of radioactive gold jewelry.

"It's no legend," she says. "I lost two fingers on account of that ring. The tumor's going to be active on my corpse. Come on over, I'll show it to you."

"No, I've got to do something else right now."

I hear that Herodotus bemoaned the invention of iron, seeing nothing in the shimmering, molten metal but a way to make swords and arrowheads that much deadlier. As with any invention, the opportunities for charity and depravity exist side by side.

Take radium needles, for example.

Needles are supposed to inoculate you against diseases by giving you a small, ineffective dose of the nasty things so that you can build up your immunity to them. But what if you get infected with the disease of money fever? Because we've all been inoculated with various strains of that old sickness, and we all know that some people will get addicted to that golden needle and catch a serious case of the fever.

Lou Koppelman said it started in his mother's throat.

I head back to the crime scene and wait until Mr. Czernowitz is alone. Then I walk in and ask him, "So how was your *Tu B'Shevat?*"

"Fine," he says. "And yours—?" He glances up at me, registers a Spanish face, starts to go back to his jewels, then his eyes meet mine.

I tell him, "You know, I just learned that means the 'Fifteenth of Shevat.' Kind of an Israeli Arbor Day—you know, thanking God for the successful regeneration of patches of desert by planting green fields and forests. You're supposed to celebrate by eating almonds and dates and other delicacies from Israel. I love the way every Jewish holiday ultimately revolves around food."

He eyes me the way a groundskeeper watches a cloudy sky.

"But you prefer to smoke," I say.

And the clouds are darkening.

"I've been smoking for fifty-one years and it hasn't killed me yet," he says, with a stale chuckle.

"No, but it sure clouded your thinking."

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His eyes narrow, the lids shielding the whites.

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about radioactive jewelry, Mr. Czernowitz. Specifically, the radioactive necklace that you gave to Laura Koppelman."

There's a microsecond of genuine shock, probably a defensive reflex, then the shell hardens and he says, "Get out of my store or I'll call the cops."

"Good. Then we can all go out to Cedar Grove Cemetery and dig up the corpse and hold a Geiger counter up to it. It's not going anywhere—that stuff has a half-life of sixteen hundred years. Hell, I bet we could get a reading right through six feet of clay."

"I said get out—!"

"Look, you're not fooling me, Mr. Czernowitz. I just have the nasty habit of blurting out the truth when nobody wants to hear it. I must have gotten it from my mother."

The arc of his anger fizzles and his face and shoulders collapse.

They don't always crumble this easily, believe me.

"You *knew*," I say.

Yes, he knew. And that's not the worst part.

He tells me that he owed her a huge retirement and a piece of the business. And that it was cheaper this way.

He asks me if he'll have to go to a federal prison.

I tell him, "No, that's where they send all the crooked corporate accountants. They send all the small-time dirtbags to the state pen."

It's a lonely place where greed lives, and I don't like it here. I want to go home to my daughter and my boyfriend and feel human for an hour, luxuriating in their warm touches, and convince my child not to waste her life watching television.

My job is investigating other people's screwups, but I suspect that I'll never learn much about my own predecessors, and what strands of DNA were knitted together to make me, or discover precisely how hatred sliced away at my people, and how we managed to dodge the blade at every turn.

As the cops take Mr. Czernowitz on the perp walk down Forty-seventh Street, I turn to walk away, and someone in the crowd asks, "Who was that? What did he do?"

What did he do? He switched gods, baby.

He became Americanized.

He betrayed his people.

And it comes to me, like a line I've heard on a million TV shows. "He was one mighty scratched diamond."

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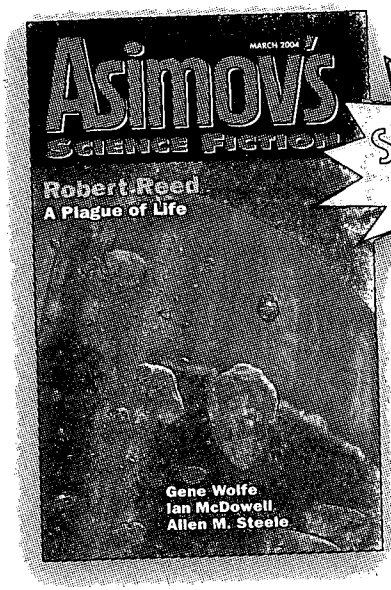

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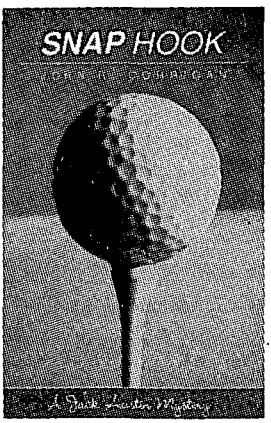
Booked & Printed

Don Herron

Long a source for critical studies of the mystery field and the occasional biography of a crime writer, university presses more and more in recent years have begun publishing the actual literature of detection. In particular, they are emerging as an intriguing niche market, able to keep books in print that the major presses in New York might allow to lapse. Since mysteries always have offered portraits of their locales and distinctive regional personalities, some university presses even issue crime novels as part of their contribution to the regional culture.

Evidence of this development is the reprint in trade paperback of the cases of private investigator Joshua Croft from the University of New Mexico Press. The author, Walter Satterthwait, resides in Santa Fe, and sets his scene there. So far, this university press has done four Croft novels, with *The Hanged Man* (2003) the most recent, available again a decade after the first edition of 1993 from St. Martin's Press.

University Press of New England just launched "Hardscrabble Crime" in March, 2004 with Snap Hook ($24.95) by John R. Corrigan, a companion line to their list of general fiction set in the hardscrabble states of New England. Jack Austin is a native of Maine, a pro golfer who plays on the PGA tour. Introduced in *Cut Shot* (2001), Jack is worried about making the cut in the game even as he tries out a rookie caddie, an inner-city teen who suffers from dyslexia, as he does. The crime that pops up is the kidnapping of the infant of a tour official by Russian mobsters, but Corrigan holds way back on the rough stuff—even the inner-city teen isn't all that troubled. When I think of sports mysteries, I think of Dick Francis (who doesn't?) and a touch of Francis-like sadism would have jumped this one up for me. But then I've never played golf, and Corrigan might have the ingredients just right for his target audience, with more personal life than crime, and lots and lots of putting.



The University of Arizona Press is also issuing brand new myster-

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ies, with a focus on the Southwest. Their trade paperback DECEPTION ON ALL ACCOUNTS ($14.95) is a first novel by Sara Sue Hoklotubbe, set in the Cherokee country of modern Oklahoma. Drawing on her Cherokee birthright and a career in banking, Hoklotubbe introduces bank employee Sadie Walela, who comes to work one morning to find an armed, masked bandit waiting inside the building. A co-worker is shot to death in the ensuing robbery, and Sadie finds herself suspected of being an inside link to the crime. Lawman Charlie McCord takes her side, prompting one skeptical Fed to sneer, "Well, well, well. If it isn't our Indian banker woman and her sidekick, the Lone Ranger." The investigation plays out well enough, with a couple of twists, but as usual for a first mystery it doesn't have all the oomph one might wish for (but think of Tony Hillerman in *The Blessing Way*, good but by no means the masterpiece level he'd hit a couple of books later with *Listening Woman*). The best parts of this one are the quiet glimpses into local life, as when Sadie explains, *"Unitelvladi digalvnv* . . . Cherokee words for grape dumpling. Blue dumplings are the same thing as grape dumplings, a traditional Cherokee dish made out of grapes—possum grapes." Hoklotubbe has the scene down, and now only needs to figure out some more cases for her heroine to sleuth her way through.

In 1998 Duke University Press issued Catherine Ross Nickerson's critical study, *The Web of Iniquity: Early Detective Fiction by American Women*, and follows up with generous trade paperback reprints of this pioneer crime writing, with introductions by Nickerson. Anna Katherine Green, famous for her mystery *The Leavenworth Case*, the bestselling novel of 1878, has two novels under one cover—THAT AFFAIR NEXT DOOR and LOST MAN'S LANE ($21.95)—while the lesser-known Metta Fuller Victor appears again with THE DEAD LETTER and THE FIGURE EIGHT ($21.95). I'd always heard that *The Leavenworth Case* was the first full novel of detection to appear in America, but apparently Victor's *The Dead Letter* from 1866 scoops it by a dozen years. As long as novels have been published, of course, women authors always have been among the top sellers, a fact that sometimes seems to be forgotten. It's good to see an academic press bringing this material back to life, but allow me to note that while until recently the Academy in general may have been concentrating heavily on male writers (Hemingway, Faulkner, those guys), us genre readers have enjoyed writing by women all along. The first paperback science fiction novel I bought as a teenager was by Andre Norton, neé Alice Mary Norton, and who wouldn't admit that Leigh Brackett is one of the best hard-boiled writers?

The Feminist Press at the City University of New York is giving a fresh reading and feminist presentation to Dorothy B. Hughes's

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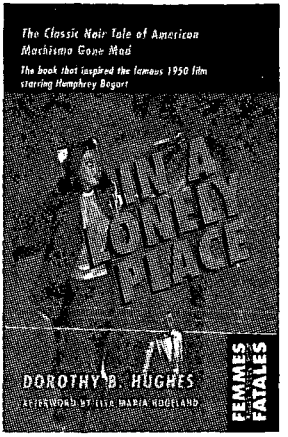
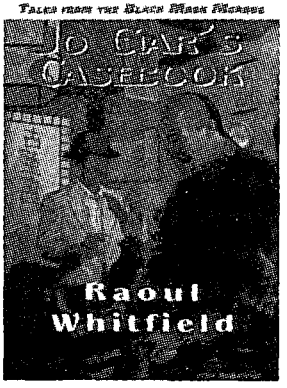
classic 1947 noir novel IN A LONELY PLACE ($14.95 in trade paper), part of their new "Femmes Fatales: Women Write Pulp" series. Man, I can't argue with that, not after the line by Laurel Gray, "If you don't take your hands off me, you won't be any good to any woman any more." But you don't really need the feminist tack to make this one worth reading. Hughes perfectly captures the noir mood of Los Angeles by night, and her portrayal of Dix Steele, serial rapist and murderer, is especially compelling in light of all the recent studies of serial killers. In those days, they didn't yet call them "serial killers." But Hughes comes very close, in the lines " '. . . maybe Brucie was one of a series, like our series. . . .' He asked only one question. 'Was she one of a series?' " A great book, whatever the reason for reading it.


The Classic Noir Tale of American Machismo Gone Mad
The book that inspired the famous 1950 film starring Humphrey Bogart
IN A LONELY PLACE
DOROTHY B. HUGHES
AFTERWORD BY LISA MARIA HOGELAND
FEMMES FATALES

I might quibble, though, with calling Dorothy B. Hughes "pulp." *In a Lonely Place* originally appeared in hardcover from Duell Sloan Pearce, not in a pulp venue, and Hughes began literary life as a poet—the Feminist Press afterword by Lisa Maria Hogeland notes that she was a Yale Younger Poet in 1931. A distinctly literary writer, for many years the mystery critic for the L.A. *Times*, Hughes isn't true pulp.

For real pulp, try stories published in the pulp magazines. With JO GAR'S CASEBOOK ($20.00) by Raoul Whitfield, Crippen & Landru has kicked off a series of trade paperbacks entitled "Tales from the Black Mask Morgue." These are the genuine article, tales pulled from the wood pulp pages of *The Black Mask* from the 1930s. Whitfield, writing under the penname Ramon DeColta, set his detective Jo Gar out on a nice variety of cases in and about Manila, and for any fan of that hard-boiled era, they make for a good read. They do not approach the level of Hammett's series of short stories about the Continental Op, my gold standard for judging pulp detection, but I have no hesitation in recommending them.



The name Hugh B. Cave (still active in his nineties!) is synonymous with pulp, perhaps most famous for his horror and

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weird menace fiction, collected in *Murgunstrumm and Others* (1977) and *Death Stalks the Night* (1995). I freely admit that I cannot stand those stories. Every critical nerve I have rebels when I dip into them, so imagine my surprise when I discovered that I really like his detective fiction. Crippen & Landru have collected all ten stories Cave sold to *Black Mask* under the title LONG LIVE THE DEAD ($16.00), popular enough to already demand a second printing. In "Curtain Call" appear the lines, "I may have been born without brains, but the Lord granted me a fair pair of dukes, and at in-fighting I'm remarkable. In a phone booth I could probably lick Joe Louis." That's the kind of antic moment you get out of the best pulp. COME INTO MY PARLOR (Crippen & Landru, $17.00) assembles eleven tales Cave sold to *Detective Fiction Weekly*, but the most fun per page appears in the hardback from 2000, BOTTLED IN BLONDE ($29.00), from another press, Fedogan & Bremer. Cave did nine stories about his drunken detective Peter Kane for the pulp *Dime Detective*—for pure entertainment, they do the job.

In 2000 Fedogan & Bremer also released Donald Wandrei's FROST ($29.00), collecting eight adventures of the deadly Professor I. V. Frost from *Clues Detective*, including "Bride of the Rats." Wandrei was a friend of mine back in the 1970s, but at that time I hadn't seen this series, among the hottest pulp writing I've ever read. No holds barred, a cross between Sherlock Holmes and some pulp avenger like The Shadow or The Spider, with pistol-carrying feminist sidekick Jean Moray, this is the one book I cannot recommend enough—if you want authentic pulp action.

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THE DEATH OF RONNIE SWEETS

RUSSEL D. McLEAN

DAY ONE

Twenty-nine is not old.

At least, that's what I keep telling myself. I'm not the tallest guy in the place, I suppose, but I certainly feel the oldest. There's a guy next to me who must be at least eighteen, but has the baby skin of a fifteen year old despite being about six feet tall.

The girls look older, but in a childish way. They look at least eighteen, but capable of being fifteen.

The band is good; loud, raucous rock belted out with the enthusiasm and arrogance of youth. If I was a few years younger I'd be down there moshing with the best of them at the front of the stage. These days, however, I just want to be back at my apartment, having a quiet drink and reading a good book.

Okay, maybe hitting twenty-nine *is* getting old.

Some girl sidles up to me. She's drinking from a bottle of blue vodka-imbued alcopops. She mouths, "Hi," to me, and says, "You here on your own?"

"I'm meeting someone," I say. That's true enough.

"Aye? Someone special?" We're doing the special kind of talk that's reserved for nightclubs only: shouting in a conversational tone.

I reply, "No," but my words are drowned out as the band on stage finishes their song and the crowd goes wild. She holds a second before asking me to repeat myself.

When she gets my words, she says, "Are you gonnae buy me a drink, then?" I look at her for a second and think that she's quite attractive. She has long dark hair, worn loose, with a dyed stripe of white down the right side. The effect is intentionally sexy. Her

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eyes are a watery blue and she's dressed in black, the uniform of goth that seems to be overtaking the rock scene these days.

I would say yes, but there's something about her that bothers me; I can see her as somebody's daughter. There's that age thing at work again. I really feel like I don't belong in places like this anymore.

"No," I say. "Sorry."

She gives me a look that says, "Sod you, then," and goes off to find some other prospective fella.

I stand alone, holding my pint. It's in a plastic glass, but that's pretty much a given in a Dundee club. Ros, my girlfriend, always used to laugh when I told her that the Scots can turn nearly anything into an offensive weapon. She comes from America, where the crooks are more sloppy and less inventive with so many guns close to hand.

The band starts up again, the lead singer having just hurled some abuse at the audience. He's a tall, lanky kid with traces of acne still on his face. He's got a powerful voice, though, imbued with just the right attitude that you believe every word he says. Not that I'm a musical expert, mind you. Although if Pete Waterman can get paid for the crap he creates, I guess I have just as much chance.

I stand on my own and listen to the music, letting my body find the beat, my head bobbing in time to the bass that throbs through the floor and up into my feet. The singer growls at the crowd:

I lick my lips in anticipation,
Sweet, honey-dripping, dulled sensation.
I'm in limbo, no need for fear;
The Devil cannot find me, hear?
A goddamned lie,
A liquid sin,
Open mouths let the Devil in.

Not that many of the kids here are listening to the words. Most of them are the skate-kids, that new generation of half goth, half hip-hop, all arsehole. I asked one of them why they listened to Marilyn Manson once, and he said, " 'Cause, like, he's guid tae skate tae." Moron! Mind you, its not like I can find any reason to listen to the androgynous arse. Maybe it is all he has going for him; "good to skate to" might look good as a quote on the cover of his new album.

And finally, halfway through the song, Jimmy's at my side, bopping away to the beat with a stoned expression on his face. I lean

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down to his level—he's one of the few guys in the universe even shorter than my five-six—and say, "Lets go somewhere a wee bit quieter, aye?"

There's a bar just off the main club floor. It's not exactly quiet, but you've got a better chance of hearing what other people say to you. The band's music still drifts in, but it's a wee bit more muted.

Small talk, first, before business, it seems. As soon as we can hear each other, standing out in the bar, Jimmy says, "The American weather must hae agreed wi' you, then. Got a bit of a tan, Sam." It had only been a week since me and Ros had got back over from seeing her family in Florida.

I nod and try to turn the conversation to business. I say, "You're stoned right now, aren't you?" He nods, flashing white-to-yellow teeth at me. "Listen, do you know a kid called Ronald or probably Ronnie Sweets?"

"Chewitt, aye, I know him."

"Chewitt?"

"That's what the lads call him. I dinnae ken why, likes. Think it's a sweetie reference."

"Could be," I say. I'm not that old that I don't remember Chewitt sweeties. I used to love the adverts with the Godzilla monster chewing up the London scenery until he could get his claws on the sweets. "When was the last time you saw him?"

"Two nights ago?"

"You sure?"

"Aye. What's he done that you're after him?"

"I'm not after him. I'm after the poor sod that's going to be facing an assault charge."

"Whit?"

"Someone staved his head in the other night."

"Aw man, that's tragic!"

"Sure is," I say. I'm watching Jimmy for any reaction. I have no doubt in my head that he doesn't know what's going on. I know for a fact that he didn't do it. Ronnie Sweets wasn't a big man, but he could have taken on Jimmy no problem. And in any case, Jimmy isn't the violent type. The foolish type, maybe, but not violent. His friends and contacts, however, are an entirely different matter.

"I thought the police would be conducting an investigation."

"They are," I say. "But Mr. and Mrs. Sweets don't think they're treating the matter as seriously as they could. They have their work cut out at the moment with this drugs crackdown that

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Dundee City Council promised. So I'm doing some of my own digging on their behalf."

"Aye, sure." He grins, and says, "I'm a wee bit like Fozzie Bear, aye? Ken, the wee black man in that American cop show?"

"Huggie Bear," I say, allowing a touch of annoyance to enter my voice. "I need some names, Jimmy."

"Who?"

"Who would kill Ronnie Sweets?"

"How would I know?"

I lose enough temper, and with the hand that isn't holding my beer I grab him by the collar of his shirt and lift him off the ground. It takes a bit of effort, but the anger gives me strength enough.

"Who was his supplier?"

"His supplier?"

"He was using. His parents found a stash of dope in his room as well as a lovely little bong."

"Hey, man, thought you didn't have a problem wi' a wee bit o' hash now and again."

"Its not the hash, but the arsewipes connected with the hash, Jimmy. I just want to talk to them, nothing else. And don't worry, I won't even mention your name."

He gives me a few names, hurriedly and worriedly. People are looking over at us, expecting—perhaps hoping, this being Dundee after all—that a fight is about to break out. It doesn't, and they look away when I let Jimmy back on his own two feet.

"You're gettin' a temper in your old age, Sam," he says, smoothing down his shirt.

"Aye," I say.

"What kind of reward do I get, then?" he says to my back as I walk out.

I don't dignify that with a response. He doesn't expect one, anyway. Jimmy and I have an understanding.

I walk past the band again on my way out. The singer is snarling into the microphone and the lead guitarist is doing some heavy guitar posing as he rips off complicated, impressive riffs.

> *Oh, he's alone! He cries himself to sleep;*
> *I sleep below, oh yeah, his pain is what I need.*
> *It's what I need.*

Walking out, my brain does images of Ronnie Sweets in a hospital bed with his face caved in.

☠☠☠

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I know one of the nurses up at Ninewells. We dated a few years ago and still keep in touch. But like everyone else I still keep in touch with, we seem to only talk when I have business.

Susie was the one who let me in to see what had happened to Ronnie Sweets. His parents—Kenny and Margaret Sweets—had described to me in as much detail as they could what had been done to their only son. But some part of me had to see what had really been done to the boy. Which is why, after Mr. and Mrs. Sweets left my office, I gave Susie a ring and asked her for a wee favor.

She let me in, grudgingly, to see the Sweets kid. I say kid, but he's twenty-one and in university studying psychology. He's in his third year and getting good grades. Apparently, he wants to become a clinical psychologist, getting his hands dirty by dealing with real people and real problems in as direct a manner as possible.

Right now, that smart career move is in real jeopardy.

When you've seen enough beatings, your mind becomes accustomed to atrocity. When I stood at Ronnie's bedside, I didn't react so much as I observed. Whoever beat him wasn't professional. The bruises and gouges looked heated, almost improvised. It was pure accident that Ronnie got in as bad a state as he had. I was no psychologist, not in the way that Ronnie was training to be. However, I hoped that the amateur assault meant I was dealing with amateurs. It's easier getting them to confess to a crime; they're more likely to suffer from some form of guilt attack.

Ronnie was in a coma. Severe head trauma. You didn't need to be a doctor to see how they reached that conclusion. I hoped that he would pull through, but looking at that battered and broken body wrapped in white hospital bed linen, I didn't hold out much hope.

With images of Ronnie in mind, I do some phone book searches and get the first of the names that Jimmy gave me. I do the search from a public phone booth where they still have a copy of the local phone directory.

I'm across from a pub I used to frequent a few years ago when I knew the owner. I consider that maybe, after I copy down the addresses I want, I could have a quick drink. Just one or two.

That's all.

DAY TWO

I wake up fully clothed, lying on the floor beside my sofa. The carpet burns against my cheeks and I roll over onto my back. I

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look at the ceiling for a while before I find the willpower to stand. The room wobbles a bit, but I get my balance after a moment. For a second, I think I might be queasy, but it passes and I'm satisfied that I am not hungover.

I call the office and Babs, my secretary, answers. She says that Mr. and Mrs. Sweets called, just to check in. She asks if there's anything I want to tell them and I state, perfunctorily, that the investigation is currently ongoing and that there are some promising leads.

Babs gives a little cough to indicate she follows, and then says, "You sound a wee bitty rough."

"I had a few last night."

"Tae blend in, of course?"

"Aye," I say, feeling a schoolboy caught out by the headmistress, "that's it exactly. I was talking with people about the case. I was trying to make them feel a wee bit more at ease. When in Rome, and so forth."

Babs doesn't say anything. She doesn't need to. I know how she feels about my drinking. She's sixty-two years old next month, a veritable matron. She's been there, seen it, done it, and—as the cliché goes—she's got the T-shirt. Which is why she's one of the few people in the world best qualified to pass judgement on anyone.

"Will you be in later?"

"Aye," I say. "For a while. A few things I want to check out." Like I want to find those addresses I noted down the night before; they've gone missing and I'll be damned if I know where they are.

I hang up on Babs after saying goodbye, and massage my temples. I've got a fly buzzing inside my brain, which perhaps zaps my no-hangover hypothesis straight to hell. Not that it matters. I have work to do and, fly aside, I'm in a fit state to do it. Right after breakfast, of course.

Breakfast consists of fried bacon and some rolls I find in the bread bin that haven't yet gone hard. This is a rare occurrence and in my flat a miracle of near-Biblical proportions. I'm a moderately successful man running my own business (which is why the windows of my offices have "Bryson Investigators" stenciled across them in big letters), but I'll be damned if I can keep a tidy home and properly stocked cupboards.

After breakfast, I shower quickly and decide that, yes, I'm feeling a whole lot better. I get dressed—blue suit trousers, white shirt, and black tie—before pulling on my black overcoat and heading out the door.

I have a car, but try to use it as little as possible. I was raised in the

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country—specifically over in Fife, just across the River Tay—and I guess I got used to walking most places. The car's useful, mind you. In this job, you sometimes need to get someplace real quick.

Luckily for me, however, my offices just off Court Square, above an insurance agency, are within five minutes' walk of my flat. I stalk on over and say hello to an insurer having a quick cigarette break on the street. We exchange pleasantries for a minute. He asks if I can kill his wife and I explain that I'm an investigator, not a Contract Killer. We laugh, even though it isn't particularly funny, and I head through a wee door just beside their double doors and walk upstairs until I reach the main door of Bryson Investigations.

Babs is at her desk. She looks at me with one pencil-thin eyebrow cocked. I smile, a little nervously, and say, "Good morning."

She says, "There's some mail for you in the office. Jamie's away dealing with some miscreant worker. Trailing some wee wanker who's been taking a sickie and moonlighting for someone else."

"Fine," I say. Jamie is twenty-four, a good lad, and willing to learn. He trained as a police officer at eighteen and left the force a year ago to come work for me. I knew him a little when I was on the force, but not that well. We became good friends when our paths crossed on a case. For him, it was a simple B&E, for me it was blackmail. Our methods clicked and we became good friends. It was only a matter of time, I suppose, before he left and came to work for me.

"Oh," says Babs, "and Sandy called. He wants to talk to you about Ronnie Sweets."

I nod. I go into my office, close the door, and worry. How did Sandy know I was doing some digging into the life of Ronnie Sweets? Sandy is my contact on the force. We were school friends and joined the force together. He stays there because he feels that being part of the system keeps him a good guy. He'd feel naked and exposed, I guess, outside the machinery of the police. I guess he's frightened of being a loner—he's got a vicious temper and I suppose the pressure of group work keeps him contained.

I open the little drawer at the left side of my desk and take out the bottle of Jack Daniel's that's hidden away under some papers. I take a swig. It's cheap shit, but it helps keep me going on those days I feel I can't.

I put the bottle back in the drawer, pick up the phone, and dial through to the police station, asking to speak with Sandy Griggs once I get through.

When Sandy answers, he says, "How are you fixed for lunch?"

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"I'm not."

"Good. Meet me," and he names a bar we both know. The food there is good old pub grub. Its just what you need after a night of accidental drinking.

Sandy is already there. He's a detective, so he's not conspicuous in uniform, and from a vantage point we probably look like two old friends meeting. But something in his face says this lunch is business.

We exchange pleasantries, study the menu, and then he orders from the bar. He comes back bearing a Coke for himself and a Sprite for me. I was tempted to get a beer, but some little voice at the back of my head tells me to keep clear today; tonight's a working night.

Sandy broaches it first. He says, "Did Mr. and Mrs. Sweets tell you who put them on to you?"

"No." I knew the answer, but I let him tell me anyway.

"I did. For a very good reason. You seem to be able to turn stones that I can't. I just thought you might want to know."

"You told them in an official capacity?"

"Yes and no. I told them on duty, but they were to keep it strictly under their hat."

"They were vague about where they got my number from, right enough."

He sips his Coke and I notice that his face is getting more lined. The bags under his hazel eyes seem more pronounced. His fair hair is getting thinner. Like me, he's only twenty-nine, and his appearance worries me.

"Sam," he says, "I want your cooperation on this one."

"Of course," I say.

"I'm serious. You like to play the archetype, sure. You like to play the one good guy working outside the system. But let's face it, most of the time you just track down unfaithful husbands and runaway kids."

"I do good, though."

"Aye," says Sandy. "The point is, I want to know where you're going with this one. Ronnie Sweets isn't a coke fiend. He isn't a mugger. He doesn't have any priors. He's just a kid who smoked dope and probably did a lot of minor offences that he got away with. Problem with minor offences is they're always just one step away from the not-so-minor, you know what I'm saying?"

I nod. The food arrives. Sandy has a vegetarian baguette. I have scampi. It smells good.

When the waitress is gone, Sandy says, "I think some real hard

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cases are mixed up in this. And I don't want an arrest messed up all because you aren't a police officer. I want arrests to be made. That's why I want you to keep in contact with me a wee bit more than usual. I've done you enough favors; time you did me some." He tucks into his food as he's speaking.

I don't say a word for a moment, but simply nod between hot mouthfuls of scampi. It tastes good, but that might be just because any food tastes good when you're recovering from a monster hangover. I know what he's saying. I try to think of it as helping Sandy, not helping the police. It makes the idea just a little bit easier to stomach.

"Sure," I say. "How is the kid?"

"Not good," says Sandy. "I telephoned the hospital this morning. He hasn't come round. Chances aren't good."

"The parents telephoned me this morning. They want to know how much progress I've made. Christ, it's only been a day."

"We're single men, Sam," he says. "Not only that, but we don't have kids, at least none we know about. I don't think we quite understand what they're feeling."

"No," I said. "I suppose not."

That afternoon I make some phone calls from the office, getting numbers from the names Jimmy gave me. Two of them get me answering machines. On the third, a man answers. He says, in a gruff voice, "Whit?"

I say, "Is that Jim Mackie?"

"Who's this?"

"Mr. Mackie, my name is Sam Bryson. I'm a friend of Ronnie Sweets." That little sentence earns me an abrupt dial tone. I cradle the phone, smiling. I have my man.

A little bit of work earns me Jim Mackie's address. Mackie is one of the names that Jimmy gave me the other night. Jimmy swears he really only knows Mackie by reputation. Mackie's a dealer, and a hardarse at that. He might even be pimping and into God knows what kind of crap. For a guy hitting thirty, that's not bad going.

I make a little note to pay Mister Mackie a visit when it gets dark.

I don't mean to, but I fall asleep sometime in the mid afternoon. I'm typing up notes and filling in official forms when the tiredness hits, and I close my eyes, leaning back in my leather chair. The blackness takes over entirely, and I fall into sleep.

I dream.

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I'm floating through the hospital. The corridors are all exactly alike. They're hazy, like looking through a pair of glasses that are far too strong for your eyes. People walk past in slow motion and their words are quickly forgotten, almost as though I never really heard them.

I'm standing next to Ronnie Sweets when the dream comes into focus.

His injuries are somehow more shocking than they were in the flesh. I feel sick to my stomach, and something inside me turns as his head levers itself round so his bloodshot eyes are looking right into mine. His flesh is purple and red, the veins on his forehead standing out almost half an inch from the skin. He reaches out with a clawlike hand and I cannot tell whether he means me harm or if he's reaching out to ask me for help.

In the distance, slow and muted, comes a deep groan of pain.

I wake up and look at the clock on the desk: five thirty P.M. It will be getting dark soon. The sun's down by seven thirty this time of the year. The best time to make an impression on Mackie will be after dark.

Babs knocks on the door and walks in with barely a beat. She says, "My Raymond's waiting downstairs. It's our anniversary. He's booked dinner. For tonight."

I say, "Go, enjoy yourself."

"You'll be okay?" She looks concerned.

"Aye," I say. "Fine."

"Good. Maybe you should have yourself an early night."

I smile. "I have work to do."

"Of course. Take care, Sam," she says, and something in her voice tells me she really means it.

She leaves without another word. I watch out the window, to see her cross the street and meet her husband, Raymond, who's waiting for her in a grey Peugeot 306. She looks up to the office window and I know I cannot escape her gaze, so I wave and smile. She returns the gesture and gets in the car with her husband.

I wonder how long it is they've been married. I'm sure she's told me, but I can't remember.

I feel jealous of them, in a sense. I never wanted to marry. I don't think I'm the marrying kind, really. All around me, my friends are marrying and divorcing at a rate of noughts and I can't help but wonder if there's any point. I love Ros, but there are some days I can't shake this doubt, this feeling that what we have can't last forever. Looking at Babs and Raymond it seems so easy, but some part

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of my mind still says love only happens in the storybooks. In real life, you have only a finite and randomly allocated time with someone you love. If you don't end it, death surely will, and the end of love is the end no matter how it comes. Love is no more than luck of the draw in the end. But that's life all over: luck, circumstance, and Fate with her blindfold delighting in the chaos she causes.

I make one call before I leave the office. I tell myself I'm just being considerate to an old friend.

Mackie's pad is on the Hilltown up the back of the Wellgate Shopping Centre. The Hilltown moniker is pretty apt, because the road runs up a steep angle for what seems like miles.

Mackie lives above a cheap, independent video rental place. I go in there for a moment and browse the shelves. I'm not really looking for anything, but I'm just taking a moment to focus. I feel too wound up, and I have to take a moment to force myself to relax.

The clerk behind the counter at the rear of the store eyes me carefully. I'm his only customer. Maybe I'm imagining things and maybe he doesn't give a shit what I'm doing in here, but I can't shake the feeling he's watching me carefully.

I look over and smile at him. I only succeed in making him more nervous. He's a kid around twenty years old with a bad complexion. His face must have been a battleground once and the war on acne left its scars pockmarked all over. He's naturally greasy and his short hair is arranged in spikes that must take him hours to achieve in the morning.

I pick up a video and examine the back of it. It's a low-budget, low-rent British crime thriller. Unsurprisingly it's a tongue-in-cheek East End London gangster comedy. Ever since that *Lock Stock* nonsense, everyone's been trying to jump on the same pony. No wonder it's in danger of its back breaking.

I waste a bit more time, but I can't procrastinate forever, as appealing as the idea may be. I nod to the clerk and walk outside.

Mackie's security door is to the left of the video store. I buzz his number and wait. A voice answers after a moment. "Aye?" Same voice I heard on the phone earlier.

"Let me up," I said.

"Who are you?"

"I'm a friend of Ronnie Sweets."

There is no reply. The other end of the connection dies. I wait around anyway, and my instincts prove to be correct. I hear a low buzzing noise. I push the door and it opens, letting me inside.

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I walk up the stone steps to the first floor. Mackie's door is right at the top of the first flight. It stands open and a man with a football-shaped head and squat, muscular body stands in the space. His hair is cut short and he's going bald. His eyes are road maps, his pupils are small, his irises watery green. He wears faded blue jeans and a scabby white sweater. He has a pair of scabby Nike trainers on his feet that are almost dead.

"I don't know you," he says.

"But you know Ronnie Sweets, right Mister Mackie?"

"Aye. What's he to you?"

I bend the truth a little and say, "A family friend. Can I come in."

"No."

"You hurt him, didn't you, Mister Mackie? And if it wasn't you, you know whoever it was that did, am I right?"

He's more intelligent than he looks. He stares blankly at me, giving nothing away.

"I just want to talk to you."

"Are you the polis?"

"No."

"You look like polis."

"You want the truth? I was and I retired."

"Why?"

A girl appears behind Mackie now. She's waiflike, with skin as white as porcelain and a sheen on her hazel eyes that tells me she's been using. Her long blonde hair falls about her face in straggly strips. "Who's this?" she says. "Are ye no going to invite him in?"

Mackie stands aside. "Come in," he says, like it's a challenge. He's confident, maybe even thinking I don't have the balls to follow through.

I walk into the hallway. They lead me down to the right and through a chipboard door into what must be the living room. There is a small TV in the corner, no video or DVD player. The TV's tuned to channel 5; some lurid documentary, *When Carjacking Crime Goes Wrong* or some such crap. There's a dead couch and several mattresses spread out on the floor. I count four people in here and a baby's cot in a darkened corner.

One of the four people stands up. He's tall and skeletally thin with long white-blonde hair. His bare arms are marked with tracks, but he appears fairly lucid. "Who are you?"

"A friend of Ronnie's."

"Ronnie was here once, man," he says. "That's all. He was here the once and he split because he said he wis better than us." His voice

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is high pitched and nasal, like he's talking through a broken nose.

"Must have been pretty insulting," I say. "Did you get angry enough to stave his head in?" I looked at him, weighing what damage he could do if he tried to attack me. "You do know he's in the hospital, right?"

Mackie's behind me now, placing a heavy hand on my shoulder. He says, "I have tae hand it to ya, bud. You gotta lot of nerve. No much brains, ken, but a lot of nerve."

"I just want to know what happened."

"You want a beer?"

I follow Mackie into the kitchen. It hasn't been cleaned in a long time, if ever. He opens the fridge and brings out two cans of Tennents. He tosses me one and then opens his own. Neither of us says a word until he's good and ready.

"Ronnie Sweets was a wannabe kid, y'ken what I'm saying? Whit I mean is that he was rich and he wanted to be poor. He spent too much time listening to those eejits who wrote that song, ken, 'Common People.' He wanted to be poor. He wanted to slum it with the likes of me because, ken, I'm an interestin' character."

Not the description I would have used, but I keep quiet and drink from the can he gave me.

"Thing is, with these wannabe eejits, we keep them around cause we can use the cash, ken? And Ronnie Sweets was good for cash. But he was a stupid wee kid. Things got too much for him, or maybe he just got bored of us or something and he took off, like."

"But he owed you money."

"Lots of it," Mackie says, taking another long swig from the beer can. "And he just thought he could go away and back to his rich friends."

"He was middle class," I say.

"To people like me, rich is rich and poor is poor. And it doesn't matter who you are, you settle yer debts."

"He scored a lot of drugs from you?"

"Grass, the rich kids' drug. The tourists' drug." He spits into the sink, then turns and fixes me with a stare. "So he had to pay. Someone had to teach the wee prick a lesson."

"Tough lesson," I say. "The kid probably won't wake up."

Mackie shrugs. "It's the way of life, right?"

"Just one question. Did you do this?"

"Did I personally take a plank of wood or a golf club or something and crush his head?"

"Yes. That's what I'm asking."

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"You're not a friend of the family. I don't know who you are, but I want to know why you're so interested."

"I know his parents. They knew about my past as a copper, so they asked me to investigate. They want closure. They want to know what happened to their baby boy."

He nodded, and put his beer on the worktop. "So whatever you find out gets back to them."

"And no further. After all, even if you give me a full confession it is, in the end, just your word against mine."

He looks at me for a moment. "Empty out your pockets," he says. "The ones on the inside of that jacket too."

I empty out my pockets. Mostly pocket lint, my notebook, my mobile phone. He takes that and examines it, holding it up in front of his face, one eyebrow cocked in curiosity. "It's funny," he says, "how we can sometimes leave these on by accident."

I nod. "But it's not on."

"No," he says, putting it on the draining board beside a festering saucepan. "It's not on. But I had to check, understand?"

When he's satisfied I have no way of recording our conversation, he says, "I didn't pan his face myself, you understand. But he owed me money and you ask those people in ma living room, I don't take kindly when people don't pay up."

"You're a businessman."

"That's right. I'm a businessman. Like that Richard Branson, I'm supplying a service that people want and need."

I think, *very public spirited*, but keep the comment to myself. I have to admit that he's surprising me with his lucidity and forthrightness. For a wee schemie who grew up in Fintry, he's pretty smart.

"You ask anyone on the estates and they'll tell you what bastards most businessmen can be," he says. "If you don't pay up, they'll come round and take your telly away. Sometimes they'll throw you out on the streets. They don't care because all that matters to them is their money. It's the same with me. People who enter into a contract with me, while they haven't signed any wee legal bits of paper, they've entered a contract anyway. And in Scots law, a verbal contract is still a contract. And our contract's pretty simple: They pay up in time and I don't send anyone round to pan their pus."

"So you sent the boys round to teach wee Ronnie Sweets a lesson."

"Aye."

"Did they tell you what they did to him?"

"Nah. I read in the papers that he ended up in hospital." He speaks lightly. Ronnie doesn't matter to him. "It's the way of the

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world," he says. "Sometimes you just can't predict what life's going to throw at you next."

The doorbell rings. Mackie hollers through to the wee party in the living room, "Would somebody get that?" Then he turns his attention back to me and says, "Now where was I?"

"Sending the boys round."

"Aye. I didn't send them round so much as I put a wee word out for people to keep an eye out for Ronnie, for Chewitt. A lot of people knew who he was. Most of 'em thought he was a tosser, too."

"But a rich tosser."

"Who didn't pay."

I hear muffled voices at the door.

I say, "Who were they?"

"Who?"

"The guys who did it."

He rattles off three names as though they barely matter. I finish my can of Tennents as he talks.

"They came round after," he says. "And they told me what they did to the wee eejit. Jumped him on Thurso Crescent. Beat the crap out of him."

"I know."

"Kinda wish I'd been there," he says. He looks up as a commotion explodes out in the corridor.

"What the . . . ? What's all this rammie about?" he yells, steaming out past me and into the hall.

The "rammie" was a police raid, cunningly executed by Sandy and four other officers. I'd asked Sandy to give me some time to speak to Mackie first before he came wading in with the other officers and their size twelve boots.

Mackie doesn't wade in, however, but comes right back in the kitchen, ranting and swearing at me. Two officers I have not met before rush in after him but they are too late to stop his considerable fist impacting my nose. I do my best to roll with the punch but it's wild and hard. I feel the bone in my nose split as I fall away from him and smack down on the linoleum floor.

My blood spills dark red over the white surface. I see it in horrific stop-motion closeup.

I look up to see the two officers subdue Mackie. They get him in cuffs and knock him down to his knees. He stays there, seething. His eyes are fixed on me and there is a vicious anger in them.

Sandy walks in, stepping past Mackie with barely a glance at the big man, and says to me, "I hope you got what you wanted."

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"Yeah," I say. "I did." But it feels hollow somehow.

DAY THREE

Ronnie Sweets's parents sit beside their son, holding hands and consoling each other. I stand at the door to the private room, just watching.

A pretty nurse asks me if I need any help. I shake my head, take a deep breath, and walk into the room.

"Mr. and Mrs. Sweets," I say.

They turn and look at me. Mr. Sweets stands and says, "Well?"

"Your son's attackers have been arrested," I say. "They were apprehended by the police during a drug raid." I tell them about the events of the previous night. I change a few details, make out like Sandy's raid was a fortuitous coincidence, when in reality, it was premeditated and part of the deal we made with each other over lunch.

Mrs. Sweets almost breaks down halfway through, but her husband puts his arm around her and urges me to continue.

I feel terrible telling them about their son's life. They look disappointed, almost disbelieving. The worst thing about my line of work is delivering the bad news and, unfortunately, the truth nearly always is bad news.

When I'm finished, Mr. Sweets tells me that their payment will be settled in the next few days. I say that's fine, and then I say that I'm sorry. I don't know how sincere they think I'm being.

DAY FIVE

Ronnie Sweets dies two days later.

I don't take the call myself. Babs intercepts it. She comes through to my office to tell me, and I feel like crying. I feel as though my work has been wasted, and I'm sure Mr. and Mrs. Sweets must feel the same way.

Babs goes back out, leaving me alone in the office. I never knew Ronnie Sweets. I don't know if he was a bad guy, or if he was simply a good kid who got involved with the wrong people. All I ever really knew of him was a bandaged shell, no better than a corpse.

I'm not a religious man. Sometimes I like to sit in the church, however, and try to make peace with the universe. That would be the right move, now. I need peace and solitude and a time to think.

I open the drawer in my desk and pull out a bottle of Jack. It burns my mouth, like paint stripper, but enough of it and I'm sure the world will seem better.

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CUPBOARD LOVE

NEIL SCHOFIELD

He wondered if it had been murder. No, you couldn't really describe it as that, although he felt as guilty as though it had been. Accidental death? Well, no, you couldn't say that either, because, if he was really honest with himself, it hadn't been an accident and we just don't know about the other part of it, do we? No one had ever found a body and no one ever would. Unless, and he shivered at the thought, unless someone found their way into that—Place. Actually, he told himself, we don't know much about anything, do we, so keep it like that, close your eyes, lie back and think of—well, think of something else, anything other than that.

Nine months or so before, Howard Bentinck had found a new place to live and he was very pleased with it. He had been searching for a depressingly long time, but eventually he had heard, from a friend of a friend, of a converted loft in Clerkenwell that was going begging.

The loft was a spacious affair on the fifth floor of what had been once a warehouse, just off the Clerkenwell Road. An area which was becoming very fashionable, said the agent, and extremely handy for the City. A superb investment, he said, for a young, ambitious City man with an eye to the future. Buy now, hang onto it for a year or two, and you'd more than double your investment.

Howard liked the loft well enough. It was enormous, running the whole length of the building, at least sixty feet long, with newly pointed bare brick walls, which he also liked. Red iron pillars supported the roof which was at least fifteen feet above their heads. He liked that too. At one end the developer had created a sort of open mezzanine, designed to act as a bedroom space. Under the mezzanine was a door that led to what the agent coyly referred to as "the usual offices." There was a fully equipped American-style open kitchen at the other end of the apartment,

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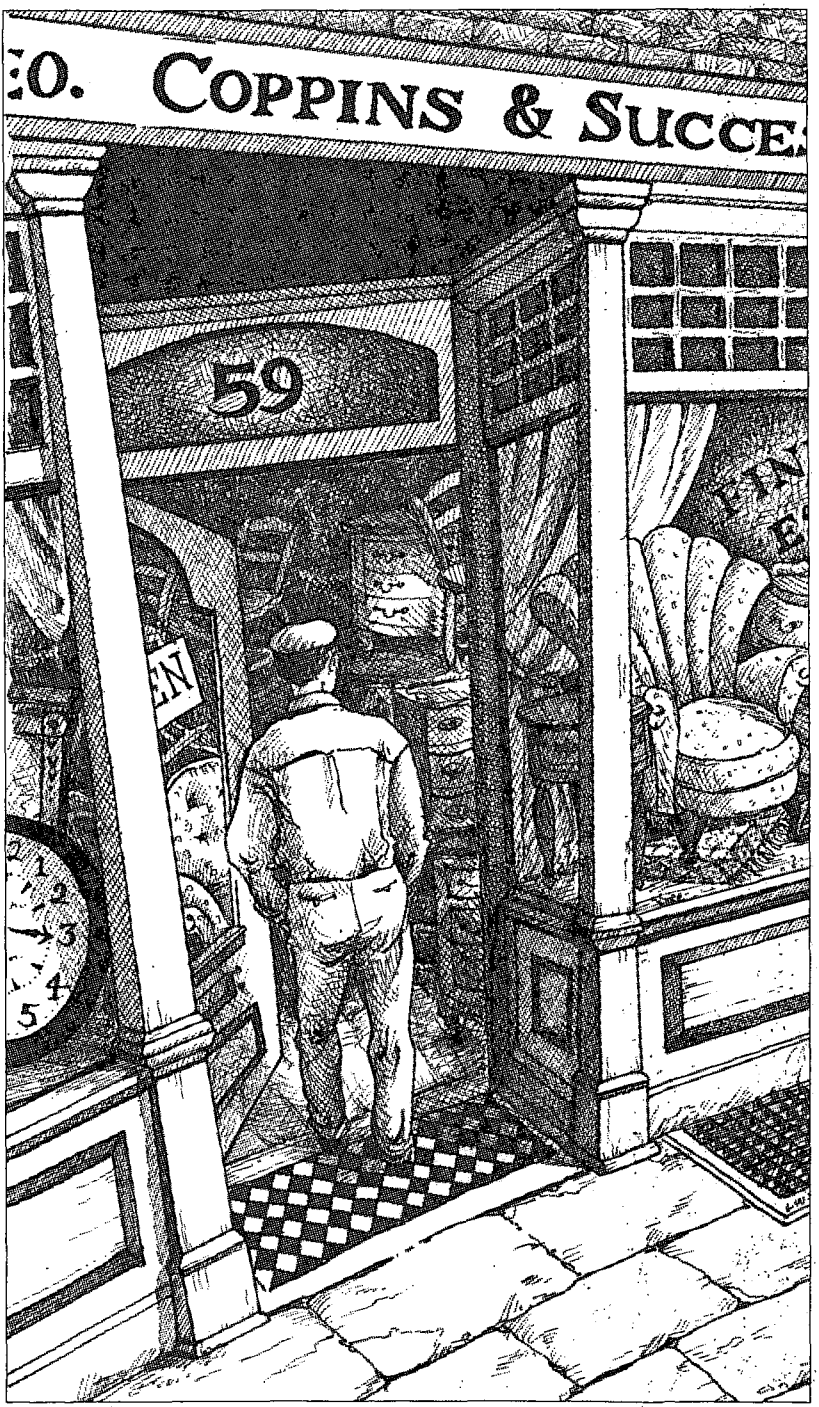

Linda Weatherly

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with a breakfast bar. And best of all, there was a fireplace in the very center of the room, a brick-built, gas log affair, with a metal hood and flue which rose to the cathedral ceiling. The place was light and airy, with a polished wooden floor and high, high windows which looked out on the City.

He wondered if it had been murder. No one had ever found a body, and no one ever would.

It had been, said the agent, built by the same developer who had created those darling flats down at St. Thomas's Wharf; he was sure Howard had heard about them. And, well, here we were. One month on the market and these had been snapped up like hot cakes. This was the last remaining apartment.

Howard tapped one foot lightly on the wooden floor (underfloor heating, the agent had early and quickly pointed out) and thought about it. The price was a bit steep, but he could handle that. And his year-end bonus was sure to be in the low six figures.

The thing that tipped the balance was that Fiona *didn't* like the apartment. He had asked her around the day after he had seen the place for the first time because, well, because it seemed like the thing to do, that was why. He sometimes wondered whether he was really up to speed on their relationship. Were they engaged, or not? He knew, well, he was fairly certain that he had never actually proposed, but lately a lot of things seemed to be taken for granted. He had responded to this situation in the same way he responded to any situation he wasn't sure about. He sat back and waited. Doing nothing freed him of the responsibility of actually making a decision. He had once, to be fair, made a feeble stab at loosening her limpetlike grip on his life, suggesting that perhaps they should see a little less of each other. Fiona had told him firmly not to be so silly and so things went on as usual.

Fiona ffinch-Basset was a large girl—well, woman, really, since she was on the outskirts of thirty. She swept into the apartment, armored in St. Laurent and Hermès, looked around with an expert eye, and nodded immediately.

"This is not you," she said, "this is exactly the sort of place you ought not to be living in."

He showed her the view of the City from the tall windows.

"No," she said, "absolutely not." But she looked at the City with a satisfied air, noting approvingly that it was still there. As it jolly well should be at this time of day. Howard excused her propri-

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etary air, knowing that it stemmed from the fact that her father was the chairman of a merchant bank and that her three uncles, brother, and two brothers-in-law were also out there somewhere, beavering away in various financial side-galleries increasing the ffinch-Basset fortunes.

"So," she said, "you've signed, have you?"

"Not," said Howard apologetically, "actually, yet."

"Well, don't." She set her barrette more firmly into her long glossy hair and frog-marched him out to lunch at Lorenzo's. That did it. The same evening, Howard went round to the agency and signed the contract.

When he saw his signature on the same document as a figure that looked like a Missouri telephone number as dialed by someone in Uttar Pradesh, he felt the first of many slight attacks of weakness.

But, he told himself, it was an investment, and he owed it to himself as a young, trendy rising star in the financial market. He also knew that stars and markets can fall as well as rise, but he put that thought to one side, just for the moment.

The main problem, he soon discovered, was furnishing the place. The furniture he had brought over from his old flat in Clapham sat miserably around, dwarfed by the proportions of the place, and making the loft seem even more vast than it was.

He realized that he would have to do something radical and went out one Saturday to buy some giant furniture. He found what he was looking for in the shape of two gargantuan leather sofas, two wing armchairs, and a long coffee table. These went on one side of the fireplace to create a sitting room. A noble oak dining table, six dining chairs, and a sideboard completed the other half of the space. He was astonished to find that it needed at least ten huge table lamps to make any sort of impression on the vast airy spaces above.

When he added up all the checks he had signed, he found that he had spent on furniture fully a twentieth of what the apartment itself had cost him. He hoped that the bullish market projections he was currently turning in weren't quite as iffy as privately he was afraid they might be. He felt a light, cold wind on the back of his neck.

But the night the furniture was delivered and arranged, with the fire and the table lamps alight, sitting on the sofa—one of the sofas—with a glass of scotch in his hand, idly watching the television and waiting for the oven to *ping* the readiness of his dinner, any loitering nervousness seemed ridiculous. He was

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warm, well housed, and everything was as solid as it could be.

He looked at the opposite wall and wondered what to do about it. It really was very bare. The window side was all right, but that twenty-five-foot expanse of wall looked extremely naked. You could only have so many tables. It needed something . . .

Fiona knew exactly what it needed and told him so on their next Tuesday night. Tuesday night was her night for staying over. Because now, after consulting several friends, Fiona had decided that a converted loft was in fact rather a trendy place to live, even though what she really saw him in was a mews house in the Royal Borough. She propped her head up on one elbow and told him that what it needed was her friend Sudi.

Sudi wasn't the answer however, because what Sudi wanted to do was hang a thirty-foot silk tapestry from Persia.

"You were very rude to poor Sudi," Fiona said on the phone the next day. "She was very cut up about it."

"Not as bloody cut up as I would have been."

"Don't be coarse. You're dining with Daddy and Mummy tonight, don't forget, so don't go to the pub with those appalling cronies of yours."

What was he going to do about this woman?

"Listen," he said, "I think I'd rather skip tonight, Fiona, if you don't mind. I really think we ought to have a talk about . . . things."

"What things?" she said. "Whatever are you blithering about? Don't be ridiculous. Seven thirty sharp and don't be smelling of beer." And she hung up.

The trouble was, now that he was living in a chic converted loft in Clerkenwell, as opposed to a rather ordinary Clapham flat, she seemed to become more determined than ever. Tuesday nights turned into Tuesday and Thursday nights. And that long talk about "things" just never seemed to happen. He knew what was going on. He was drifting into something that he wasn't sure he wanted. But neither was he sure he *didn't* want it. Oh dear.

One day in early May, about two months after buying the flat, Howard decided to walk home through the side streets after work. March and April had been a real pig, but it was for once a warm, sunny day. He had brought his umbrella with him that morning, since, like all Londoners, he knew that what looks like a warm, sunny morning can simply turn out to be a cunningly laid trap. However the evening was warm and sunny too, which was lucky for him because, wouldn't you just know it, he had left his umbrella in the Underground. It seemed like an evening that

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invited a stroll, so he branched off the Gray's Inn Road into the rabbit warren of little streets. And in one of these streets he found the shop.

The sign over the peeling shopfront said "Geo. Coppins & Successors." It was a dismal-looking place, with dirt-encrusted windows and a wide-open door that allowed the interested passer-by glimpses of tumbled piles of furniture.

Howard entered. He was immediately surrounded by sofas, armchairs, tables, dining chairs, coffee tables, ottomans, all heaped and tangled in a hopeless confusion that stretched away, it seemed, into infinity. He stared helplessly about him. Then part of the back of the shop slowly detached itself from the rest and materialized as a small tubby man wearing a filthy, aged tweed overcoat and trilby hat, despite the torrid heat. His face was grubby and unshaven, and to his lower lip clung desperately the remains of a hand-rolled cigarette.

This dreadful apparition spoke.

"What can I do for you, squire?"

"Actually, I'm not sure. I was just browsing."

"Well, browse away, squire. There's lots to browse on."

Geo. Coppins—for Howard had decided that this was indeed he—regarded him beadily.

"Was you browsing," he said, "for anything in particular, or was it just a general, all-over sort of rummage you had in mind?"

Howard wished he would do something about the cigarette end. It had just emitted a faint curl of smoke.

"Well, really what I'm looking for is a cupboard."

"Ah. Cupboards. Well, I got cupboards. I got cupboards coming out of my earholes. If it's cupboards you want, you come to the right place. What kind of cupboard might you be looking for?"

"A big one," said Howard. He described the converted loft flat and the wall he had that needed filling.

"Ah. What you want isn't just big, then," said Geo. Coppins. "You want substantial." He thought for a minute, and then to Howard's intense relief, he took the millimeter of cigarette from his mouth and dropped it casually on the floor and stamped it into oblivion.

"I got something might interest you."

He turned, beckoning Howard to follow him, and led the way through the back recesses of the shop. They seemed to walk forever, through room after room, all filled with the same assortment of unsold, battered furniture, piled up to the ceiling.

"Some good stuff here," said Geo. Coppins, as they passed between some swaying piles of gilt-painted ballroom chairs.

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"Trouble is, there's a slump on at the mo. Very quiet it is, very quiet indeed. Too quiet."

They came at last to a final room, which was empty except for a huge black cupboard standing against the far wall.

"There," said Geo. proudly, "is that substantial or what? That's what I call monumental, that is. Have a look at that, go on. Don't be timid. Approach it. Inspect it. View it from close to."

So Howard approached the cupboard, or wardrobe, or whatever it was. It was substantial, Geo. was right. It was enormous. It towered over him, monolithic and black. It was like something the Sumerians might have built and then worshipped.

It was at least eight feet high and ten feet long and it was very, very old. It was made of a dense black wood, with hardly any grain. The top was ornamented by a substantial cornice which was terminated at each end by a beautifully carved dog's head. The door was so finely carpentered that he could scarcely see where it was. The only clue was the enormous brass key that jutted from the lock.

"There you are," said Geo. Coppins, "told you. Substantial, innit? That's real workmanship, that is. Seventeenth century, that is, and they don't make them like that anymore, I can tell you."

Howard was stroking the surface of the wood. It was hard and cold, a little like marble, the surface smooth under his gliding fingers.

"What sort of wood is this?"

"Goferwood," said Geo. immediately. "At least, that's what the bloke I took it off said."

"Goferwood?" said Howard. "What's goferwood?"

"What the Ark was made out of," replied Geo., absolutely serious. He wagged a hand.

"Go on, open 'er up. 'Ave a good poke around."

Howard turned the key and pulled open the door.

"That's interesting, that is," said Geo. Coppins, "it don't always do that. Not first off. Usually you 'ave to struggle to impose your will on it."

The door was fitted so closely that it took the whole of his strength to pull it fully open. He looked in. Inside, the cupboard was black. It was so black that at first it felt as though he was staring into nothingness, and it took a severe effort to focus his eyes and make out the back of the cupboard. There were five shelves in the center flanked by large empty compartments designed originally, he assumed, as hanging spaces.

"Hmm," he said. "Useful."

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"Useful? Put whatever you liked in that. House a small family, that would. Useful, he says. Get along with you," Mr. Coppins said impishly. Howard closed the door and looked again at the front.

"What sort of dogs are those, would you say?" he asked.

"Retrievers," said Geo. Coppins promptly. And Howard had to agree they were retrievers, sprouting without a join from the wooden cornice and panted into nothing, eyes bright and ears cocked.

Running under the cornice was a faint carved inscription.

"Looker that," said Geo. Coppins. "That proves it."

The inscription read, *J. D. fecit. Anno Domini 1602.*

"J. D.," said Howard, "who's J. D.?"

"Well," said Geo. Coppins, taking out a filthy pouch of tobacco and beginning to roll himself a cigarette, "according to the bloke I had it off, who was told by the bloke who *he* had it off, and God knows who *he* had it off, it was knocked tergether by a bloke called John Dee. Doctor Dee. Ever heard talk of him? No? Well, he was pretty much about in this part of the world. Magician sort of affair, necrowhatsername."

"Mancer. Necromancer."

"That's it. Lived hereabouts, Clerkenwell anyway. Naughty old bugger, by all accounts, much in demand at the time for his wicked old ways. Summoned up evil spirits, cast spells, that sort of affair."

"And he made this?" "Knocked tergether" really didn't seem the right way to describe a piece like this.

Mr. Coppins fixed Howard with one bright little eye as he lit his cigarette.

"Well," he said, taking the first drag, "we can always believe that if we want to, can't we."

Howard bought it for the asking price of two hundred pounds—which proved to his satisfaction that it was not seventeenth century, but a Victorian copy—and Geo. Coppins agreed to deliver it the following day.

And that he did. Howard had expected him to turn up with a cart pulled by a spavined horse, but in fact, what arrived was a modern van, with an electrically operated tailgate lift. And into the bargain, a mute assistant called Horace. They had a small wheeled contraption that Geo. Coppins called a *dolly* and with which they both seemed to have a close, though warily respectful, relationship.

"Go on, Horace, lift your end onto the dolly, that's it," and, "Watch 'er, Horace, the dolly's going!" and, "That's it, Horace, sneak up on 'er blind side."

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They towed the cupboard *into* the goods lift, which like any respectable converted warehouse, Howard's building still retained, then *out* of the goods lift, and *into* the apartment, where, with many cries from Geo. Coppins of "Your end, Horace" and "Easy does it" and inevitably, "Dolly, Horace, dolly!" it was finally, painfully decanted against the wall, exactly where Howard had planned.

"I bloody hope you're sure about the placement, squire," said Geo. Coppins, wiping his forehead, "because you don't want to be moving that again in a 'urry."

He handed over the large brass key to Howard, who looked at it. It was a curious thing, simply a long cylinder with, he noticed as he turned it in the light, half-effaced words chased into the metal. He couldn't see how a key like this could possibly work without wards to turn the lock tumblers, but he put it into the lock and turned it anyway. The door opened immediately. He looked in. It was just as large and black as he remembered. But not empty. Leaning in one corner was an umbrella. He reached in and took it.

"Someone's left this. Is this yours?"

Geo. Coppins shook his head. "Not mine, squire, never carry 'em. If God had meant to use umbrellas to keep the rain off, he'd never have given us the Iveco two-ton van."

And then Howard saw the gold band around the handle.

"That's odd," he began, and then saw, looking more closely, that the gold band bore the initials "H. B."

"It looks like mine," he said. "But that's extraordinary."

Geo. Coppins was already backing to the door, with Horace and Dolly dancing attendance.

"Extraordinary is as extraordinary does, is my view, squire," he said. "And there's more things in heaven and earth, I think you'll find." But Howard was still peering at the umbrella, remarking at the tiny scratches and blemishes that marked the handle and which he remembered, he was almost sure he did. Then suddenly he *was* sure.

"But it *is* mine," he said. "How the hell did that happen?" He looked at Geo. Coppins for some sort of explanation, but Geo. was already gone. Howard heard the thunk and wheeze of the lift descending.

And there it was. Howard's Cupboard, perfectly filling the space for which it had been destined. He lit the fire that night, even though it was a fine summer's evening, and sat in front of it, nursing a glass of wine, watching the firelight reflecting off the dogs' heads on his fine new cupboard. He especially liked the way the

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flicker of the flames made their eyes gleam and the way the subtle shift of the shadows gave movement to their ears and mouths. You would have sworn they were panting, he thought, panting to chase something, to bring something back.

Three weeks later Fiona said to Howard, "Where did you put the salt and pepper?"

It was a Tuesday night, and Fiona was staying over because she was nothing if not consistent. She was setting the table, while Howard put the finishing touches to a chicken casserole.

Howard said, "I'm not sure, actually. I couldn't find them this morning, as a matter of fact."

Fiona said, "How can you possibly misplace a thing like salt and pepper?"

Howard thought for a moment, and then he left the kitchen and walked down the long room to the Cupboard. He had been thinking of it as the Cupboard with a capital C for some time now.

He unlocked and opened the door. There on the shelf in front of him were the salt and pepper grinders. He took them, locked the door, and went back to where Fiona was standing, looking at him as if he had gone suddenly insane.

She said, "Is that all you bought that horrible cupboard for? To keep your salt and pepper in? I call that extremely wasteful."

Howard put the salt and pepper on the table and went into the kitchen to carry out the casserole. He wasn't going to explain. Not to Fiona. She wouldn't believe him, even if he managed a halfway reasonable explanation. To be truthful, he'd been having a hard time finding a halfway reasonable explanation for himself about the Cupboard since the day after Geo. Coppins had delivered it to the flat.

It was a rainy Saturday. He was loafing around the place, debating whether to do the shopping now, or to wait until the midday hours when he wouldn't have to thread his way between caddies pushed at lethal speeds by half-mad pensioners unhinged by the prospect of discounts on frozen cod balls.

He stared gloomily out of the window. He would have to start thinking soon about the summer. Holidays would be a problem again. Fiona would insist on going to Portofino, or St. Trop, or Sète, where one or other of her yachty friends would have *a double berth just going begging, darling, do come, it'll be such fun.* Where Howard wanted to go for the holidays was not some sun-baked Med resort full of braying Henrys and Henriettas, but Torquay.

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And Torquay thirty years ago, what's more. Strange how the holidays of childhood always seemed in retrospect to be one long, idyllic summer day. That's what he remembered—endless sun-filled days among the Devon dunes, in the days when the beaches weren't quite the anthills they had become. He sighed. Doing a lot of sighing these days, he noted.

Shopping. He went to the Cupboard for his umbrella, which he had left there, since that is where it had turned up. He turned the key and opened the door. He reached in for the umbrella and noticed, with a tiny shock of disbelief, that there was a book on the shelf in front of his eyes. He took it down and stared at it. Now this definitely hadn't been there yesterday. He looked at the cover. The book was *The Wind in the Willows.*

He knew this book. His father had owned a copy of this very edition and had given it to him when he was eight. He couldn't remember what had happened to it. He opened the cover. And there on the flyleaf was written, in a spiky, juvenile hand: George Bentinck. And, "If this book should dare to roam, smack its bum and send it home."

There was a faint singing in his ears. He flipped through the book, and as he did so a slight sprinkling of sand fell from between the pages. Quite suddenly, he was in Torquay, lying under a dune, reading. His brothers had called to him to come for a swim, lazy oaf, and he had grabbed his towel and raced down the beach. Only at the end of the afternoon when they had all returned to their rented house had Howard remembered the book. His father had made some spicy comments about people who didn't know how to look after things. They had all searched for it the next day, but Howard couldn't remember which dune he had been lying under and it was hopeless.

And this had been the book. He was sure, sure, sure. He could even summon up the feel of it between his fingers, the way he had to squint against the sunlight to read—he flipped the pages, yes, here it was—

> *"What's up, Ratty?" asked the Mole.*
> "Snow *is up," replied the Rat briefly; "or rather,* down.
> *It's snowing hard."*

He could recall exactly how strangely satisfying it had been to be lying on a summer beach, reading about the Rat and the Mole in the Wild Wood in winter.

He closed the Cupboard's door extremely delicately, placed the book on an end table, and went out to do the shopping without

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an umbrella, and so got absolutely soaked, but didn't notice a thing. When he got home he realized without interest that his distracted purchases included four packets of suet and no milk or sugar.

He plonked his bags down and picked up the book again. Yes, it was. It was the same one. You read about strange coincidences like this: Someone going to Paris, foraging among the *bouquinistes* by the Seine and finding an old schoolbook with their name inside it. But here in your own apartment? In a cupboard bought only yesterday and which had been empty yesterday? Wait a minute, empty except for the umbrella. Yes, there was the umbrella too. That couldn't be explained either. He looked up at the dogs. Strange how a change in lighting altered their expressions. Now their jaws seemed to be parted in big grins. One grin at each end.

So that was how it started and that was how it went on. The human mind is a weird machine, he reflected more than once in the following weeks. Somebody seeing a ghost just the once would have the right to be astonished and terrified, but if, and he'd heard of things like this, if a ghost walked through the wall of your bedroom *every night*, across the room and through the opposite wall, you'd get used to it. You'd become blasé, nonchalant.

Howard simply got used to the fact that the Cupboard found things. No, not found exactly, *retrieved* is what it did. Three days after *The Wind in the Willows*, it retrieved a file that had been missing at the office for over two weeks. The place had been turned upside down, secretaries had had hysterics, the office manager had had tantrums, but to no avail. And there it was one night, lying innocently on the shelf of Howard's Cupboard. He had returned it to the office the next morning and "discovered" it behind a filing cabinet to general applause.

It retrieved his gold cufflinks, missing for two months. He had suspected Fiona of filching them to teach him a lesson about something or other, which was a rather mean little habit she had. It retrieved a cigarette lighter that he had lost several years before and which he didn't really want back because he had stopped smoking shortly after, but it seemed churlish to refuse it. And it retrieved a school cap that had been flushed down a school toilet by two desperados from the Upper Fifth who thought that young Bentinck was too cocky by far.

It also found his salt and pepper or the egg whisk or the car keys or his briefcase or whatever he happened to lose or misplace. And that was extremely useful. He got into the habit of mechanically going to the Cupboard whenever he couldn't find

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something, because he knew the Cupboard would always be able to retrieve it.

There was a slight downside. The Cupboard did have its funny little ways. Sometimes it seemed to be a sort of dead-object office for the frankly insane. How to account, for example, for the four pairs of blue serge trousers, bundled up and secured with an Eton tie? Or the gold watch wrapped in bacon rind? Or the packet of sandwiches, salami on rye, with a sweet pickle?

In one hilariously exasperating week, the Cupboard retrieved the following: One birthday cake, with fifty-four candles, bearing the inscription "To Lefty, From All the Guys. Welcome Home" in green icing; a set of padded pot holders, with the embroidered legend "A present from Berchtesgarden"; a fine lithograph of Robin Hood's Bay; a small, intricate brass machine marked "Dr. Jonas Finch's Patent Nose-Hoover"; a nutritious meal (partly consumed); and a broken orrery.

Howard simply closed the door on them, knowing by now that when he next opened the Cupboard, they would be gone. But the time he opened up to find a *thing* immersed in murky liquid, in a large glass bottle, with one floating eye that blinked at him, rattled him severely. He closed the door on that one particularly swiftly. And the day after when he found a tiny, incredibly ugly, but perfectly formed mannikin, hooded and caped, holding a lantern and intoning in a chilling, rusty voice the word *Halpagorn*, he knew he had to be firm.

"Look," he said to the Cupboard, feeling rather foolish as he did so, but knowing that it had to be done, "you've got to be reasonable. I appreciate what you do, and I know you're trying to be helpful, but there really is no point in retrieving things that don't belong to me and that I don't really need."

There was a long silence.

"I mean," he went on, slowing down a bit, as you do when there is absolutely no reaction from the person or the thing you're talking to, "some of these things are quite frankly unusable. That thing in the jar, for instance, now what was I supposed to do with that? Or the boxes of fireworks or that Chinese Encyclopaedia? I mean, thirty volumes. I don't mean to offend you, but can't we just stick to things I've actually lost myself?"

The Cupboard sulked for a week. Its front seemed to take on a sullen, brooding look, and the dogs' eyes stared straight through Howard with a complete lack of expression. For a good seven days, whenever he opened the door, the shelves were stubbornly, and thankfully, empty. And then on the eighth day, almost shyly,

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it seemed to him, the Cupboard came up with a silk scarf that he had left in a taxi. They seemed to be back to normal. Or as normal as possible, except for the occasions when Fiona was there.

Fiona did not like the Cupboard and never tired of saying so. She thought it was a perfectly horrid cupboard. She thought it was atrocious, appalling, revolting, too black, too big, too rococo, too everything. It took up too much space, it attracted too much attention, it was simply too much altogether. She thought he should sell it, give it away, smash it to pieces, burn it, throw it out of the window, *anything*, rather than keep the vile thing.

Howard dug in his heels. As with the apartment, the fact that Fiona didn't like the Cupboard gave it added value.

Fiona's dislike was reciprocated: the Cupboard didn't like Fiona either, and made it plain in subtle and not-so-subtle ways.

For instance, it wouldn't open its door for Fiona. No matter how she fiddled with the key, her jaw sticking out obstinately, her face redder and redder, the door remained shut. She would take the key out and stare at it viciously.

"It's not even a proper key, dammit."

Then she would try again with zero results. And often after this performance, as soon as Fiona gave up and stamped away, the massive door would ever so slowly swing open all by itself. Just to infuriate her. Which it did, very effectively.

And then there were the objects which the Cupboard would occasionally offer Howard. Very slyly and always when Fiona's back was turned, when she was in the bathroom, or upstairs. It was almost as though the Cupboard were giving Howard a nudge of the elbow and saying, "Go on, son. Do it. You know it makes sense."

There was the dark green bottle with a white label bearing a skull and crossbones and, to banish all doubt, a lurid illustration of a man clutching his throat and with a hideously contorted face. There was the long dagger with a beautifully chased blade and silver intaglio on the ebony handle. There was the strangling cord and there was the Smith & Wesson .38 Detective Special. It offered him hatchets and clubs, crossbows and RPGs, and on one memorable occasion, a round, black metal bomb like something drawn in a comic, complete with a sputtering fuse. Howard closed the door quickly, wondering if the Cupboard had finally lost its marbles and was going to massacre them all. But there was no aftermath. The Cupboard was eccentric, certainly, but not entirely stupid.

Howard often wondered what happened to the objects he

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refused. All he knew was that they weren't there the next time he looked. Where did they go? Back to where they'd come from? Or a more sinister idea, perhaps there was some Place of the Lost? A sort of MisPlace? He had a shivery vision of a bleak, gray, sunless shore by a fetid sea, scattered, littered with the rejected, the abandoned, the rolled up serge trousers, the things in jars with eyes that blinked, the suitcases, the umbrellas, a million lost things. He tried not to think about that any more than he had to, because it made him extremely uneasy.

The holidays passed in Portofino as Howard had sensed they inevitably would, the summer crawled exhausted to its end and segued into autumn. The days shortened, the nights lengthened, and it was the time for long evenings, all the lamps lit and a blazing fire reflecting nicely in the dogs' eyes.

Howard cleared the decks for winter. He spent one whole Saturday with linseed and beeswax grooming and polishing the Cupboard until it gleamed. It gave him a rather nice antique gold watch fob for that. He actually wore a wristwatch and so made the mistake of wondering aloud whether it might not make a rather nice Christmas present for Fiona. A futile thought as it turned out because he inexplicably lost it two days later, and the Cupboard never returned it.

And now Christmas inevitably hove into view. Like the summer holidays, it was a season which Howard approached with mounting dread. He knew that despite all discussion, they would almost certainly be spending Christmas with her family at their country home in Gloucestershire. The prospect of four days of excruciating boredom in the company of festive, honking ffinch-Bassets made him yawn in advance. He wondered idly if he could catch something, something incapacitating but not lethal, or perhaps he could suddenly manufacture a row of sufficient ferocity that Fiona would refuse to allow him to accompany her.

But on the Saturday afternoon that Fiona had set aside for Christmas shopping, he knew he was doomed. He simply didn't have it in him.

Fiona stood in the apartment waiting for him, tapping one foot on the floor. She had her back to the Cupboard—lately she affected to ignore it, extremely obviously. She watched Howard as he chased around collecting his coat, his scarf, and then going to the Cupboard where his wallet lay on the shelf.

He paid a last visit to the toilet and when he came back, Fiona was standing in the same place, fussing irritably in her handbag.

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"Righto," he said, trying to force some preseason jollity into his voice. "Shall we?"

Christmas shopping in large, crowded department stores was one of the things that Howard hated with a passion. He only had to step into the overheated ground floor of Harvey Nichols for the first familiar symptoms of an anxiety attack to begin—shortness of breath, copious perspiration, and a feeling of panic. Fiona, of course, sailed through it all, oblivious, her snowplow chin clearing a path for them. But after two hours of pointless buying of pointless things, Howard had had enough.

"I'm going out for a breath of air," he said. "I'm too hot and there are too many people."

"Honestly," she said, "you're such a wimp." And she was already walking firmly away from him. After ten paces, she turned and called through the throng, "Meet me by the harfsnarf counter in fifteen minutes."

And she was gone. Meet her where? What had she said? Oh well. Howard went outside and walked up and down the pavement for a few minutes, grateful for the crisp December air.

Then he went back inside to find Fiona. He trailed to the jewelry counter, then to the perfume department, then to Leather Goods, Scarves, Gloves, Whatnots. After ten minutes he realized that even if he located the harfsnarf counter, she would almost certainly have left it now. He wandered miserably about, hoping to come upon her by chance, but it was useless in this crowd. He was tired and fed up and he needed a drink. So he left by the Sloane Street entrance, and found a pub. There he put down his bags gratefully and had two large whiskies, cobbling together a rough draft of the excuse he was going to have to give Fiona.

After a decent interval, he took a taxi back to Clerkenwell. The flat was warm and comfortable, and he lay down on the sofa, just for ten minutes you understand, just to recover from the hellish experience that is Christmas shopping.

He woke up with a start two hours later. The flat was dark. He switched on the lamps and looked at his watch. Nine o'clock. Where on earth was she? Sulking somewhere, probably, because he'd deserted her.

He rang round a few of her friends, but no one had seen Fiona, *not for ages, darling, far too long, we really must get together.* After quite enough of this sort of thing, he stopped with the friends.

He defrosted a lasagna and ate it with half a bottle of Médoc. At eleven o'clock, he rang Fiona's mother.

"Hi, Marjorie," he said, "I was wondering whether you've seen

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our wandering girl tonight. Thing is, can you imagine, I mislaid her in Harvey Nicks," and then stopped.

He listened, without hearing, to the usual waffling from ffinch-Basset *mère* and rang off with minimum courtesy.

He turned and looked at the Cupboard. He had a queer feeling in his stomach. It wasn't possible. Was it? I mean, yes, wallets, cufflinks, all right. But this? Well, okay, stupid and laughable as it was, there was one way to find out. He got up and went to the Cupboard. He put out his hand to open the door, and stopped short. There was no key in the lock. How the hell had that happened?

And with a flash of insight, he knew perfectly well how it had happened. Fiona had taken it. He had a flash of her fiddling with her handbag as he came out of the bathroom. She had taken it to teach him a lesson, just as she had taken his cufflinks and hidden his Mont Blanc pen. The key was in her handbag.

He placed his ear to the door, feeling truly ridiculous, and listened. He thought he heard a slight something, a regular, whispering sound, but then realized that it was merely his own blood he was listening to.

"Open up," he said to the Cupboard. "Come on, open up. You know you can if you want to."

The Cupboard remained smugly impassive. The dogs' eyes were hooded and expressionless.

The next few days were wearing and stressful. The police took details, a description, and a photograph, and were mildly reassuring, reminding him that people often went a bit doolally around Christmastime, it was well known. He had embarrassing meetings with the ffinch-Bassets *en famille*, and a discussion that went round and round and got nowhere. And he left with the distinct impression that the ffinch-Bassets regarded him as Suspect Numero Uno, but for what they weren't quite sure.

That impression was confirmed a day later when a police sergeant and two constables turned up to search the flat. Eliminating all possibilities, sir, they called it.

The sergeant looked at the Cupboard. "Mind opening that, would you, sir?" he said pleasantly.

"I'm sorry, I seem to have lost the key."

The sergeant nodded. "Don't worry. We have experts."

The expert, a small, perky man, confessed himself baffled. "I dunno," he said, "I just dunno with this one. Logically speaking, there's nothing keeping that door closed, but I'm buggered if I can get it open. Still there's more than one way to skin a cat. Sorry

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about this, sir, but there doesn't seem to be any other way."

It was while he was taking the small power saw from his toolbox that the Cupboard door swung gently ajar. Everyone in the room stared at it, and then the sergeant stuck his head in. The Cupboard was bare. Howard didn't know whether to be relieved or not.

"I think that'll be all, sir," he said, and they left and didn't come back. But neither did Fiona. Ever. The posters with her face and description appeared on the billboards of Clerkenwell and the City, there were the inevitable special editions of *Crimewatch* and *Missing* on the television, but no one ever came forward, no one ever rang up with a sighting, and Fiona never came back.

After much unseemly haggling, Geo. Coppins agreed to take the Cupboard off Howard's hands for fifty quid, can't say more, seeing as how there's no key to it, squire. It left on the dolly, waving goodbye with its open door.

Howard spent a few miserable weeks reminding himself that many psychologists would say that you never mislay anything *by accident* and that he had deliberately lost Fiona in Harvey Nicks, intentionally not heard where she could be found. But after twenty days of this futile, tortured inquisition, the jury came back to absolve him of everything. He got in touch with Sudi and bought a thirty-foot Persian wall hanging which looked quite handsome on his wall.

But not quite handsome enough to stop him, when he came awake sweating in the night as he frequently did, from wondering how things were these days, in the MisPlace.

Note to Our Readers:

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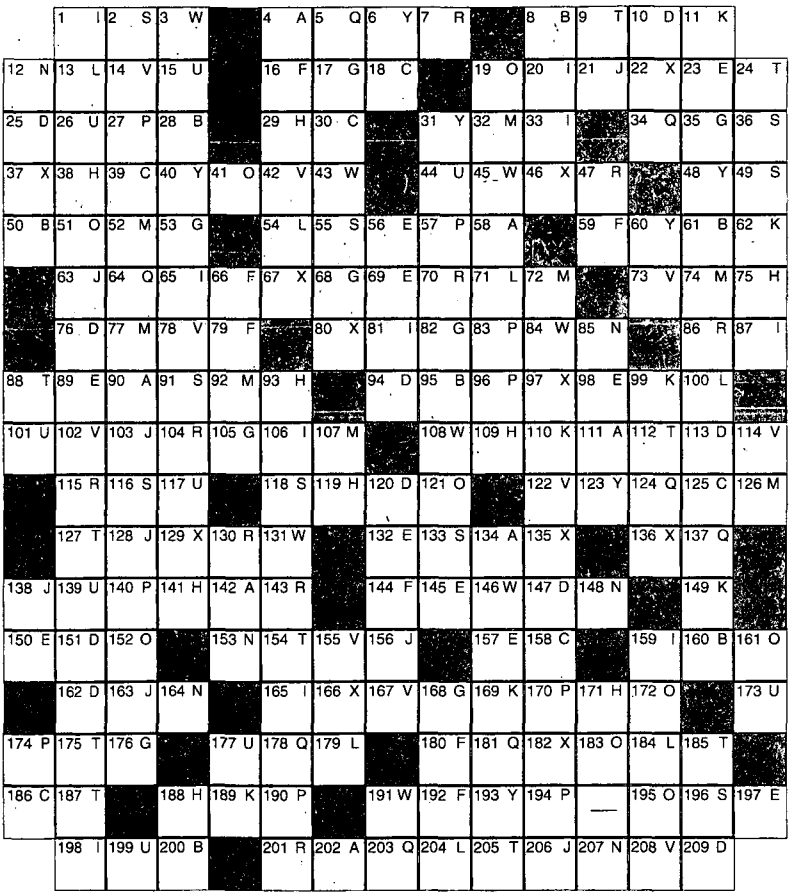
DYING WORDS

ACROSTIC BY ARLENE FISHER

Using the definitions, fill in as many words as you can in the column on the right. Then transfer the letters to their corresponding places in the diagram. A black square in the diagram indicates the end of a word. When completed, the diagram will yield a quotation. The initial letters of the words in the righthand column spell out the name of the author and the work from which the quote was taken. The solution will appear in the July/August issue. The solution to last month's puzzle is on page 126.



DEFINITIONS

A. 1967 Franklin hit

WORDS

__ __ __ __ __ __ __

90 142 58 4 202 134 111

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B. Diner surface

50	61	8	28	200	160	95

C. Fix rigidly in a practice

186	39	18	125	158	30

D. See

151	147	10	209	113	94	162	25	76	120

E. Sad in an exaggerated way

56	23	145	69	150	98	197	157	89	132

F. Like most foals

144	59	79	16	192	66	180

G. It's often seeded: 2 wds.

82	53	35	105	168	176	17	68

H. 1902 introduction: 2 wds.

188	38	93	75	109	29	171	119	141

I. One who sings

65	159	20	165	106	87	1	81	198	33

J. Ancient Syrians

163	21	156	103	63	206	128	138

K. Sap

62	149	189	99	11	110	169

L. Use up

184	71	54	100	179	13	204

M. Far from flush: 3 wds.

77	74	52	32	92	126	107	72

N. "— Sandman"

153	207	12	148	164	85

O. Found

121	19	152	183	195	161	41	172	51

P. Not above board

194	27	140	190	57	83	170	96	174

Q. Rhapsodized

124	64	203	178	5	137	181	34

R. Advantage in reserve: 2 wds.

143	47	130	115	7	70	104	86	201

S. Baritone's kin

116	133	36	2	196	91	49	55	118

T. Marilyn Monroe, at one time

205	185	9	88	112	175	187	154	24	127

U. *Vingt-et-un:* hyph. wd.

177	173	139	101	26	15	44	117	199

V. Yamoussoukro's land: 2 wds.

167	208	42	14	114	78	102	73	155	122

W. Impetuous

45	84	191	146	108	3	43	131

X. Broadcasting room: 2 wds.

97	182	135	67

80	166	136	22	129	46	37		

Y. Pound

40	123	48	6	31	60	193

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PRISONER OF GUILT

JIM INGRAHAM

That summer on the coast of Maine as I walked toward the restaurant down the heavy planks of the wharf, looking out at ships in the harbor and islands beyond them, I wondered what problem could have prompted Sylvia Weinstein to ask me here for lunch.

I found her alone at a table beyond a spindle barrier, her face partially hidden by green fronds of a Boston fern. She looked pretty much as I remembered her.

"Qu'est-ce qui se passé?" I said, wondering whether she remembered our old greeting.

"Rien," she said, and the dark eyes crinkled in playful laughter as she raised her left palm for me to spank. The eyes were the same, the smile the same, the black hair even more abundant than I remembered, but there was a quality of strength in her expression that was not there in those long ago campus days. Becoming a nurse had matured her.

"It can't be nothing," I said, dropping into a chair opposite her.

"Or I wouldn't have called Duff Kerrigan, the private eye?"

"Right," and we both smiled. "You look lovely, Sylvia. You really do."

"And you're still Irish," she said. "Full of . . . I won't say it."

The waiter came and took our order.

"I had dinner last evening with Laura Kadish, and she said you're still wasting your life."

I laughed. "She said that?"

"And a few other things."

"Like how I should get married?"

"I love Laura, but she'll never win a prize for sensitivity."

"She means well." And my expression doubtless told her I didn't want to talk about what we once had. "You dropped out of med school?"

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"My mother . . ."

"Ah, your mother. You going back?"

"I don't know if they'll take me. I might just go for a master's. I'm in psych nursing now, and loving it."

We talked about college. Neither of us had kept up with old friends. We laughed about that. After the food came, I said, "So why the call?"

She told me about a girl named Tania Amsterdam, an unhappy twenty-one year old now sharing her apartment. "You remember a man named Russell Cord? He was . . ."

"Something in the paper the other day," I said. "Out on parole, isn't he? A couple of years ago he pushed a woman down some stairs?"

"Almost four years ago. The woman was Tania's mother."

I watched her slide the tines of her fork into her quiche, her eyes lowered. She had gorgeous dark lashes, truly a beautiful woman. Sitting there looking at her, I knew it would be easy to regain strong feelings for her. Why did we break up? Her mother didn't want a goy in the family. Or was it a *shegetz*? Something like that. Neither of us wanted to hold onto a relationship that couldn't go anywhere.

"Tania was the primary witness against him."

"And she's afraid of him?"

"He tried to rape her, Duff. She knows firsthand what kind of man he is. The court took away a small business he owned and she got the proceeds from the sale. She's convinced he'll come after her. She won't leave the apartment."

"How old was she when he . . . ?"

"Seventeen. Her mother begged her not to report it to the police—another reason why she left home. She felt rejected, and for good reason. I mean, the guy came into her bedroom and was tugging her pajamas off, and her mother told her to forget it."

"But she testified against him in court."

"Only about his abuse of her mother, not about the rape attempt."

"Why not, once the mother was dead?"

"A lot of reasons, I suppose. It's not an easy thing to do, and Tania's not vindictive."

"Did she see him push her mother down the stairs?"

"No. That happened a few days after she walked out."

"How's she been living since?"

"She was working at a McDonald's until she graduated from high school. After the trial, her self-esteem plunged to zero. Facing

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the world by herself was too much for her. She quit her job and got in with a bad group and ended up working the streets. She got picked up. Her mother's attorney looked after her for a while, then she came to us."

"And you took her in."

"She needed someone."

In college every wounded warrior came to Sylvia's door.

"Where's her father?"

Sylvia shook her head. "I guess there were a lot of men in her mother's life, most of them strangers."

"Much as I'd like to help, I don't know what I can do. If he stalks her, it's a police matter."

"You could kill him."

"Yes, there's that option. Too bad he didn't go up for child molestation. There'd be a lot you could do. But if he follows the rules of his parole . . ."

"I wanted her to charge him with attempted rape, but our lawyer says after all this time she couldn't get a conviction and it would only make him more aggressive. I called Winona Dyer, his parole officer. She wouldn't tell me anything."

It wasn't until we were on the wharf walking inland to the parking lot that she asked what I would charge.

"I don't come cheap, Sylvia. I can't afford to. But let's find out first whether I can help."

Within a half hour I was leaning on the doorframe of Winona's office up on Congress Street, watching her at her desk poking chopsticks into a takeout carton.

"Sam Spade," she said, looking up, waving me in, apparently pleased to see me.

"You handle those pretty good," I said.

She laughed. "We invented them," making a joke about being Native American. She was born and raised on the Penobscot reservation in Old Town. A graduate of the University of Maine, she was also a smart, good-looking woman, recently married to a lawyer, and about the friendliest person you'd ever want to know.

"Russell Cord," I said.

"Ah, the woman who called. Right?"

"And you wouldn't tell her anything."

"Against the rules. But, if you'll help me find him, I might rise above principle."

"He's lost?"

"Temporarily. I have a BOLO out on him."

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As I sat down in a chair opposite her, she reached into her file drawer and took out a manila folder, opened it, and flipped through the pages. "He reported in and made the usual promises, and I haven't seen him since. The address he gave is a little filling station he used to own out in Pride's Corner. He doesn't live there. Nobody does. So he's in violation. The people who bought it said they had never seen him. There's another address you might try. It's where he was arrested. An old girlfriend named Muriel Harmon. She says she hasn't seen him, but that may not be reliable." She handed me the opened folder. "What's your interest in him?"

"One of the witnesses against him thinks he might come after her. I just want to see what kind of man he is." I glanced through the top sheet of the file and took down the addresses she had mentioned.

"Don't meet him on a full stomach," she said.

I noticed that Sergeant Patrick Burke, who was once my father's partner, had headed the investigation.

"Burke must be retired by now."

"That was his last case. I think he volunteered for it. Wanted to go out swinging. Maybe he can give you some leads." As I got up to leave, she said, "If you find Cord, let me be the one who sends the troops in. I don't want to have to explain you to them."

The sun was gone by the time I drove past the corral fence and two lighted windows of the old Cape Cod house, isolated out there off the Maine Turnpike with nothing around it but trees.

I pulled into the yard and shut off the engine of my Jeep, snapped off my headlights, and stood in darkness listening to the silence. Floodlights over the garage illuminated the yard. A man appeared in the front doorway of the house, changing from a silhouette into Sergeant Patrick Burke in old police blues and a torn workshirt.

"Duff? That you?"

"It's me," I said, walking toward him, then feeling the calluses on his hand as I gripped it.

I went ahead of him into the house. There was an odor of whiskey and the strong presence of cigarette smoke in the room to the left of the central staircase. As I walked over a braided rug on yielding floorboards, I remembered scampering up those stairs with his son Kevin and my sister Katie. I remembered the smell of

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soap up there in the bathroom, the stale sleepy smells in the two upstairs bedrooms.

While the sergeant got me a can of beer, I looked at the clay whiskey jugs embedded in the stone fireplace, the Currier and Ives prints, the long braided rug in front of the hearth.

I half expected Mrs. Burke to come smiling out of the kitchen, flour misting around her hands as she clasped them in front of her apron, telling me she had just made a batch of molasses cookies—a plump, happy woman straight out of a Norman Rockwell painting.

I was surprised and saddened to see pictures on the mantel of their three-year-old child Caroline—four pictures in silver frames, two on each side of bronzed baby shoes. Caroline had died twenty-three years ago when I was ten—a dark-haired girl with large expressive eyes. She had been run over in the driveway, crushed under the rear wheel of an oil truck while Mrs. Burke was in the kitchen making lemonade.

I remembered the pictures and the baby shoes being exactly where they are now. I remembered sitting quietly in this room with my sister a few weeks after Caroline had died, my father leaning across Katie's knees telling us not to ask for Caroline. I remembered him telling us that Mrs. Burke blamed herself for the girl's death. It wasn't until years later that I was told the accident had put her into a state of depression that had permanently damaged her mind.

I took the cold can of beer the sergeant handed me and watched him settle into a Morris chair and raise his slippered feet onto a footrest, knocking a newspaper to the floor. I was tempted to ask about his wife but thought better of it. She was likely upstairs. I'd been told she hadn't left the house in years and spent much of her time at her bedroom window looking out at the swing set and sandbox the sergeant had never had the heart to remove. As I later learned, the swing set now was rusted and the sandbox was barely visible under a growth of weeds.

He sat there awhile looking down at his hands folded in his lap, pondering something. "This some kind of private-eye technique, asking to come out here without telling me what it's about?"

"Russell Cord," I said.

His expression immediately stiffened. "Let's take this outside," abruptly getting to his feet, leading me across the room to the front door.

I hadn't thought my unwillingness to mention Russell Cord on the phone had anything to do with technique, but I guess it did. I

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don't like interviewing people by telephone. I like to have a face in front of me when I ask questions. I like to read body language.

It was a warm June evening and we made ourselves comfortable on a bench in a small garden off to the side of the garage. There were birch trees a few feet away, lights from the kitchen window illuminating their white trunks. The air was filled with the pleasant smells of raw earth and rotting leaves and the scent of pines. There were insects chattering all around us. Once or twice I had to slap at mosquitoes. He offered me a cigarette. "Don't use them," I said. I watched him tuck one between his lips. His hand trembled as he flipped the striker wheel on his Zippo.

"Russell Cord," he said. "What could you possibly want with him?"

"He seems to have disappeared. I thought maybe you could give me some leads."

He considered that for a while, thoughtfully watching my face. "He's out of jail?"

"In violation of his parole. The police are looking for him."

"What's your interest in him?"

I took a long draw on the beer and set the can down and slatted moisture off my fingers. The can was cold. "A client wants to find him."

He leaned down and scraped leaves off some raw dirt and made a hole with his finger, then poked his cigarette into the hole and pushed dirt over it. "Well, you've wasted your time coming out here, Duff. I have no idea where he is." And he regarded me with cold aversion, as though offended by my having bothered him with this trifling matter.

We fell into an awkward silence, sitting there looking at each other.

"Just thought you might suggest some places I might look," I said.

He stood up and shoved his hands into his pockets and stared at the ground. After a while he looked up with a softened expression. "Been away from this too long, Duff. Don't have any desire to get back into harness. I look back at those old cases, they just melt into each other. As best I remember, Russell Cord was a cheap chiseler we wanted for murder and his lawyer got it whittled down to involuntary manslaughter. If you're looking for details, I don't have any."

"Wasn't there a civil suit, brought by her daughter?"

He pondered that and shrugged. "Might have been."

"No idea where I might find him?"

"None at all," he said, and with head down and hands in his pockets, he started walking toward the garage.

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Out in front of the house, he said, laughing with undisguised condescension, "I could have told you all that on the phone and saved you the trip. You make much money doing this?"

"Enough to live on," I said.

"Well, sorry I couldn't be of more help."

He stayed at his opened door and watched me back my Jeep out of the yard. He was still there when I drove past the corral fence on my way to the turnpike—a sad little man with his hands in his pockets, looking very lonely.

I stopped at Lefty's Diner just a few doors down on Commercial Street from my loft and sat alone in a booth wondering why the visit to Burke had depressed me. The atmosphere out there, I guessed. Memories of Caroline, maybe.

At home I found a check from an insurance company in my mailbox. It brightened my mood as I spent an hour or so composing reports to be mailed out in the morning. Before I went to bed, I phoned Sylvia and told her the police were looking for Russell Cord and would send him back to prison when they found him. She said she wanted me to continue looking and did not object when I told her what it would cost her.

"I want Tania to know you're out there," she said. "I want her to know she's being protected."

Around nine thirty next morning I drove out to Pride's Corner and pulled into the filling station Winona Dyer had told me about. It consisted of two pumps on a concrete platform in front of a squat, flat-roofed building that needed paint. Used oil cans, a rotted muffler, a tire, and what looked like a man's undershirt were piled on a dented soft-drink dispenser near the office door. On the other side of the door was an old-fashioned rocking chair. Beyond the garage, in a field studded with juniper bushes, a woman was standing near a wheelless pickup truck. She yelled something at me.

"Ain't he there?" she said, getting closer.

"I don't see anyone."

She took short, timid steps toward me, keeping her eyes down.

"You want gas?"

I gave her my card. While she studied it, I looked down at her pink scalp glistening through thin gray hair. She wore no makeup. She was tiny, couldn't have weighed a hundred pounds.

She took a quick glance toward the office, then looked straight up at me, seeming to lift herself on tiptoe.

"It's about Russell Cord, ain't it," she said, putting her hand on

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my arm and quickly pulling it back, again looking toward the office. "Well, he come here and I been meaning to tell about it."

A man's voice suddenly barked, "Well now, Beulah, what in hell you standing there jawing about? Stick gas in the man's car. He ain't interested in hen chatter."

The woman ran to the gas pumps, her eyes begging me to buy gas. I told her to fill the tank.

The man stood near the rocking chair, a stout man in farmer's overalls and black rubber boots folded fisherman style below his knees. Both his hands rested on his belly—soft, fat hands, not the hands of a garage mechanic. He had a glistening red face and eyes that bulged from their sockets.

After appraising me a few seconds, he leaned forward and, placing his thumb against one nostril, blew sharply through the other, rubbed his forefinger on his nose, then wiped his hand on his leg. He became interested in me again after he had lowered himself into the rocking chair and settled his elbows on the chair arms and his hands on his belly. An aroma of neglected sweat enveloped him.

I held the card in front of his eyes so that he could read it without handling it.

He looked up at me with mild interest. "You here about Russell Cord?"

"You're Abner Wincoll?"

"That's right. I'm the man told the police I bought this place from a lawyer and never laid eyes on Cord." He lifted a foot and nudged me to one side with his rubber boot so that he could see the woman at the gas pump.

"Check the oil, Beulah, and see there's water in the battery and fluid in the radiator. This cash or credit card?" he asked without apology for the rudeness.

"I know that Cord came out here," I said, brushing dirt off my leg, inclined to laugh.

The flesh narrowed against his bulging eyes. "Beulah, goddamn it, what did you tell this man?"

The woman, holding the hose in both hands, inserted the nozzle into the Jeep and stared across the trunk at something out in the field, pretending not to have heard him. When she went to the front of the car, I walked over and opened the hood for her.

"The battery's fine," I said, then whispered, "Why did Cord come out here?"

I didn't hear Abner come up behind me. I saw his hand on the raised hood.

"Git back in the office," he told the woman.

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"It ain't right, Abner, not to tell him."

He pushed her aside and turned to me. "You tell your questions to me," he said and slammed the hood down.

"It ain't right, Abner."

"Shut up!"

He backhanded her across the shoulder, knocking her into the pump. I spun him around. He walloped me with his belly.

"You pay for the gas and get off my property," he said. His spittle hit my face.

With the flat of my hand on his chest, I shoved him across the gravel until his buttocks hit the soft drink dispenser. "You put another hand on that woman and you'll go to jail," I said, wiping a hand across my face. "Now tell me why Cord was here, or you'll tell the police."

"Get your hand off me," he said, more embarrassed then hurt.

"Why did he come here?"

"He come to get a book," the woman said. "I seen him lift a brick under the air compressor and take out a book."

"A book?"

"It had a brown cover and a little strap to keep it closed. I seen it right up close when he walked past me and got into this little green Miata and drove off."

"How'd you know it was Cord?"

"Seen his picture in the paper. A man almost as big as you. He looked funny in that little car."

"Why didn't you tell the police?"

"It ain't our business," Abner said. "Now you pay for the gas and skedaddle."

He waddled toward the rocking chair and sat down.

"What's his problem?" I asked the woman.

"He's just afraid he'll have to testify." She laughed. "He's shy."

I paid the woman and told her to call me if Abner ever hit her again.

"Oh, I ain't afraid of him," she said. She put the money into her pocket and walked off toward the field.

After stopping at Amato's on Fore Street for a sandwich and a Coke, I drove to an old section of the city and parked in front of a three-story tenement and stood on the porch looking at the name BASTON penciled into painted wood under a bell button. There were no bell buttons for the two upper floors, just wires sticking out of holes. I pushed the door open. I smelled decaying varnish as I went up worn wooden steps and walked along a railed

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landing to a door near a second flight of stairs. I knocked and waited and was about to knock a second time when a woman's voice came from inside the apartment. "Who is it?"

"I'm looking for Russell Cord."

After a long silence, the door came slightly open and a woman's eyes in thick glasses stared at me from behind a short chain. "He don't live here."

"Are you Muriel Harmon?"

She nodded.

"Cord gave the police this address."

"That was years ago. He don't live here now."

"You know where I can find him?"

"I told that cop . . ."

The downstairs door opened and a man came two steps at a time toward me. I thought it might be Cord. He was tall and had dark hair, but the face was different, a prizefighter's face—blunt nose and scars in his eyebrows. He gave me a brief once-over and told Muriel to take down the chain, ignoring me while he waited.

"I don't know who this man is," Muriel said when he went inside. "He's looking for Cord, just like the cop was."

"How come your car ain't downstairs?" he said to her.

"Cord took it. He just barged in here and grabbed the keys off my dresser. I never gave him leave. He don't mean nothing to me, Dale. I told you that. I can't help if he came here."

"Off your dresser? In the bedroom? He was in your bedroom?"

"He just took something in there. I didn't give him leave to go in there."

"Yesterday?"

"Day before. If only you'd called . . ."

"He stayed here?"

"No! Dale, you know I wouldn't do that! I told him to get out."

"So where'd he stay?"

"How would I know? Maybe at that cottage they all talked about. He said he was meeting someone there."

The man thought about that then looked at me as though for the first time. "You a cop?"

"Private investigator."

"You came to find Cord? Why'd you think he'd be here?"

"The police record said he lived here four years ago."

"Something damned funny about this." He again addressed Muriel. "Why'd that cop think Cord was here?"

"The same reason he did," jerking a thumb at me. "They're cops."

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"Was it that same one? Burke?"

That startled me. "Sergeant Burke?"

"He was here yesterday," Muriel said, glancing first at Dale, then at me.

Dale abruptly broke away from us and strode into the dining room and disappeared into what I guessed was a bedroom. Within ten seconds he came out holding a canvas bag. He unzipped it, emptying socks and underwear and two folded shirts onto the floor. I had hoped a small book might tumble out, but it didn't.

"Did he bring a small book here?" I asked Muriel.

"A book? No. That's all I saw," pointing at the bag, looking guiltily at Dale.

He gathered up the clothes and stuffed them into the bag and walked to the outside hall and dropped the bag down the stairwell.

I moved past him into the doorway. Before I reached the stairs I heard her say, "It wasn't my fault Russell come here, Dale. I wouldn't let him stay here. Why would you ever think such a thing?"

That evening I drove to an apartment building on High Street and rode the elevator to the fourth floor. Sylvia didn't know I was coming. It was eight thirty and I assumed I wouldn't be interrupting a meal.

Seeing a *mezuzah* tacked at eye level on the right side of the doorframe surprised me. Although I wouldn't have asked, I suspected it was Sylvia's mother, not Sylvia, who had placed it there.

She seemed pleased to see me.

"Come in, come in," she said, waving me inside with laughter and an exaggerated bow and sweep of her hand.

I tapped her fingers and walked into a large room where a young woman with long black hair was picking through pieces of a jigsaw puzzle spread across a coffee table.

"Tania," Sylvia said, "this is our hero, Duff Kerrigan."

When she looked up at me, I was briefly startled by her face. I could have taken an oath I had seen her before.

"Do we know each other?" I asked.

"No," she said, dismissing me with a look close to disgust. Maybe she thought I had been one of her johns.

"I'll bet you're hungry," Sylvia said.

"Just ate. But thanks," I said.

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"It's no trouble," she said.

"No, really, Sylvia, I just ate."

"Coffee?"

"Why not."

"Regular milk and no sugar," she said. "Right?"

I nodded.

"Grab a seat. I'll be right with you."

The carpet was so white I wanted to take off my shoes to walk on it. I contented myself with tiptoeing and found a chair that faced Tania and sat down.

"Sure we haven't met?"

Without looking up she said, "Maybe at the Lobster Pot. I waitress there."

"Maybe that's it." Although I was sure it wasn't.

She kept searching the table for pieces of her puzzle, paying no attention to me. I didn't think she was shy. She impressed me more as someone who stayed within herself, paying no more heed to things around her than was necessary.

"You like waitressing?" I asked, just for something to say.

She shrugged. "Only an idiot would like waitressing."

"She wants to go to college next year," Sylvia said, coming back into the room. "She's very good with computers."

We rattled on about that for a while. Finally Sylvia asked what I'd found out about Cord. At the mention of the name, Tania looked up, worried.

"How'd you find out Cord was getting out of prison?" I asked her.

"A policeman told me."

"Sergeant Burke," Sylvia said.

"That was thoughtful of him."

"He comes in the restaurant once in a while," Tania said.

"What did he say when he called you?"

"That Russell was to get out of prison and I should be careful. He warned me not to even talk to him."

"Has Russell tried to contact you?"

"I don't think he knows where I am."

"But you think he could find you."

A sudden fear deflated her expression. She turned her face away.

When Sylvia brought me coffee from the kitchen, I asked, "Do you know anything about a cottage? I was told he might have . . ."

Tania looked up. "I never thought of that," she said. "He used to stay at my mother's cottage on Muskrat Pond. You think he's there?"

"It's worth looking into," I said.

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After getting directions to the cottage and chatting a while about her interest in computers, I went to the door and lingered a moment hoping to get another look at Tania's face. But even when I said goodbye, her gaze didn't budge from the puzzle.

In the morning I stopped at the National Assurance Company office to pick up a work order, then headed northwest on the old Gorham Road. In less than an hour I was on a dirt lane that led through a pine forest down a hill to Muskrat Pond.

The cottage was all by itself in a clearing a hundred feet or so from the water—a small, single-story building with stained shingles and a wide-rail porch with latticed underpinnings. A green Miata and a Toyota 4Runner were parked near the porch steps. Beyond them two picnic tables and a stone fireplace were half buried under a drift of pine needles. There was nothing moving anywhere except leaves in the trees and dark wrinkles sliding over the surface of the pond.

As I went up wooden steps to the porch, I heard a shot from beyond the clearing. I scrambled down the steps and got my Beretta from the Jeep and sprinted across the clearing to the edge of the woods, then moved on wet moss through swamp maples until I saw the angry face of Sergeant Burke barely visible behind a thicket of witch hazel.

"I can drop you and sink you in that pond and nobody'll be the wiser," Burke was telling someone I couldn't see.

I moved to my left until a gray shirt and the dark hair of a man emerged from behind the broad trunk of an oak. The man had to be Russell Cord.

"You shoot and how the hell you gonna get it?" the man said. "I ain't got it on me. Don't think she won't use it."

"Muriel? You leave it with her?"

Something snapped under my foot. A startled face peeked from behind the tree. It was Cord and he was laughing. "You gonna shoot him too?"

Faster than Burke could react, Cord slipped into a patch of hemlocks with Burke running after him, firing two shots from his revolver. But Cord was gone.

I crashed through underbrush to the edge of the clearing and found Burke leaning on a tree, out of breath, coughing into his hand. We both watched the Miata scooting up the road toward the highway.

Burke didn't say a thing but his look blamed me for Cord's escape.

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"There was blood on some leaves back there," I said. "You see it?"

"Why don't you mind your own goddamned business," he said, striding out into the clearing.

"If he's got a bullet in him," I said across his shoulder as I traipsed after him, "and goes to an emergency room, this won't stay a secret. So why don't you tell me what's going on? What are you doing here?"

He didn't look at me or say a word. He got into his 4Runner and started the engine and drove off.

I couldn't doubt he was going to Muriel Harmon's apartment. I considered asking my friend, Police Lieutenant Mike Kadish, to head him off, but he'd have to know what was going on and I'd have to tell him. Because the shooting took place in Standish, he'd tell me to call the state police. And the state police would tell me to stay put until they got here.

I couldn't do that.

I drove well above the speed limit until I reached the city, but I didn't see the 4Runner or the Miata until I found them parked outside Muriel Harmon's tenement. I heard men shouting. I opened the door and jumped back when a part of the upstairs railing broke. A man was teetering at the edge, his arms flailing. I watched him tumble backward into the stairwell. His head hit the wall. His neck buckled. I was looking into his eyes when his neck snapped. The eyes bulged and stayed open when the limp body dropped on the stairs, rolled over, and stopped at my feet.

Three faces leaned over what was left of the upstairs rail. Then Muriel, with her hand at her mouth, screamed, "Oh my God!"

I knelt over the body. It was Cord. I couldn't find a pulse. I told Muriel to call 9-1-1.

"Maybe it was an accident," the medical examiner said, stooping over Cord's head, lifting the edge of his collar, "but there's what looks like an exit wound here in the shoulder. That makes it the color of a different horse. I'll know more when we get it downtown."

Detective Ira Holcomb, who knew Sergeant Burke and had apparently worked with him, assembled us in Muriel's living room—Burke, Muriel, Dale, an assistant named Vance, and me.

"So what were you arguing about?" Ira wanted to know.

Muriel promptly left the room and came back with a small book, visibly avoiding Dale's eyes. Before she could give the book to Ira, Burke snatched it from her hand.

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"I knew you had it," he said. "It belongs to me."

"It's evidence, Pat. I'll take it," Ira said.

"Evidence of what?" Burke said. "Cord stole it from me, and goddamn it, it's mine!"

The detective calmly insisted, holding his hand out. "Give it to me. It's evidence."

When Burke refused to surrender it, Dale grabbed it and handed it to the detective.

"It's mine!" Burke yelled, reaching for it.

Dale put an arm across his chest and stopped him.

The detective gave the book to his assistant. "Seal it in an evidence bag and store it in the van."

"It's mine," Burke said, almost whimpering as he watched the book leave the room.

I stayed in Muriel's apartment longer than I wanted to, listening to Dale's, then Burke's, then Muriel's version of what had led to the tumble down the stairs. Everything centered on the book.

"So why is it important?" Ira wanted to know.

I shook my head. Both Dale and Muriel said they had no idea. "It has nothing to do with anything here," Burke said. "It's my property. Cord stole it from me."

"You said all he left here was that bag," Dale yelled at Muriel. "So why didn't you tell me about the book?"

"You scared me, Dale. I don't know what I was thinking. But there's nothing in it, only numbers."

I listened for an hour to Dale and Burke and Muriel tell their versions of what had happened. Apparently Burke had caught up with Cord at the head of the stairs. Dale came out of the apartment and refused to let them in. Burke insisted on getting a book Muriel said she didn't have. Cord tried to push his way in. Dale crowded him against the railing and it snapped.

"That's about how it happened," Burke said. "It was an accident."

"I didn't mean for him to fall like that," Dale said. "I just didn't want him in the apartment."

When Ira looked at me, I said, "All I saw was the man fall into the stairwell."

"So why'd you come here?" he asked me.

"Like them, I came to get the book."

"But you have no idea what it's about," he commented dryly, apparently believing nothing anyone had said. When he was satisfied that the gun wound hadn't killed Cord and that he'd been shot before he got to Muriel's place, he dismissed all of us except Burke, whom he asked to follow him downtown. He told Dale

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and Muriel and me we'd be questioned at the police station in the morning.

Sylvia wasn't home when I called. Tania answered the phone in a voice heavy with suspicion.

"You can stop worrying about Russell Cord," I told her.

I was expecting a hearty thanks, but what I got was, "I know. Sergeant Burke called me."

For a man who said he could hardly remember the case, Burke was certainly showing a lot of interest in it now.

I thought about that all the way to my loft, which is above a ship's chandlery in a warehouse on a pier near the Coast Guard station. I sat at my computer and brought up the form I use for billings and got halfway through the statement I would send to Sylvia. But I couldn't concentrate. I went down the back stairs onto the wharf and sat with my legs dangling over the pilings, listening to boat horns shrieking in the harbor, watching seagulls cruising the surface for something to eat, wailing their plaintive cries.

I couldn't sit still. I had to find out what was in the book. I trotted down the wharf and got into my Jeep and drove to the police station and pestered my friend Mike Kadish for a half hour in his office, but he wouldn't give up the book. He said he'd have to sign for it, and he didn't want to explain to some lawyer in court why he had taken it a second time out of the evidence locker.

"So you've read it."

"I have," he said. "It's not a diary. It's a ledger. The only name in it's a lawyer's. The rest is entry dates and amounts of money. It looks like a record of payments."

"In whose handwriting?"

"We haven't made that determination."

"Money coming in or going out?"

"It doesn't say."

"Dates?"

"The first week of every month."

I got up and walked to the door, turned, and said, "Beginning about twenty-five years ago, right?"

"And how would you know that?"

"Just guessing," I said.

I found the sergeant at the workbench in his garage sharpening cutters on a chain saw. He looked up when I rapped on the

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doorframe, pondered me a few seconds, then looked back at what he was doing.

"You forget something?" he said.

"I'd like to talk." I drew up a high stool and perched on it. "I have to testify tomorrow morning. I don't want to go in there ignorant of what's going on."

"And just what is it you want to know?"

"I witnessed a shooting. If their questions get into that . . ."

"You think I tried to kill him?"

"I don't think you're that foolish," I said. "And I don't think the police will give much of a damn how he got shot since it was only a flesh wound."

I watched him draw the file over the cutter blades. I watched his face, for some reason remembering the time I had seen him with my father at my mother's funeral. Katie and I and Kevin were waiting at the limo while he and my father talked to the priest at the chapel door. He was like a brother to my father; at least that's what my father told me. I don't think I was out here because of that, but maybe I was.

I said, "Mind telling me how you found out about the book?"

"I don't think I have to tell you a damned thing, Duff," he said matter-of-factly without malice.

"Well, that's not entirely true," I said. "I'm in this whether you like it or not." And I leaned forward and said, "I represent Tania."

His face froze. He didn't look up. His hand trembled as he worked the file.

"I know you've been protecting your wife," I said.

"You don't know a damn thing."

"I know that Tania looks like Caroline, the same eyes, almost the same face. It doesn't take a genius to know what could happen to your wife if she found out you went to another woman who had a baby."

He took a deep breath, then looked up at me, half accusing me of butting into his affairs, half acknowledging that he had nothing to hide if he admitted that Tania was his daughter. He looked away and wiped moisture from under his eyes. He cleared his throat. "So you know about the girl." He let those words hang out there a long time before he said, "Twenty years ago I asked a psychologist what would happen if my wife ever saw that girl. He said what little self-esteem was holding her together would disappear and she might go insane."

"There's no need for her to find out," I said. "Cord's dead. There's nothing in that book that implicates you. You can make

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up your own reasons for being at that pond or you don't have to mention it. I won't unless they bring it up. As far as I'm concerned you didn't want to shoot that man, you just wanted to stop him from running."

He set the chain saw down, leaned back, and gave me a long appraisal. "I guess I underestimated you, didn't I."

"There's nothing in the book to implicate you—a lawyer's name and entries of payments dating back some twenty years."

"You know that for a fact?"

"Before Cord went on trial, he hid it at that filling station out in Pride's Corner. He came there and picked it up first thing after he got out of prison. And I guess he called you and set up the meeting at Muskrat Pond, threatening you with it. I don't think you knew about the book until he told you about it."

"Those people at the filling station told you what was in it?"

"There's no way anyone reading that book would connect it to you. Let's leave it at that." I couldn't compromise Mike Kadish.

He sat there with his eyes riveted on me. He pondered his fingers. He got cigarettes out of his shirt pocket and put one to his lips. He spent several seconds getting it lit.

"Nobody else knows we were at Muskrat Pond, unless you've told them," I said.

He thought about that. "What'll you tell them when they ask why you were looking for the book?"

"I went to that filling station looking for Cord and heard about the book. I was just curious . . ."

"And what brought you to Muriel Harmon's place?"

"The Miata. It's what Cord went to that filling station in. I knew it was Muriel's."

I don't know what he planned to tell the police or what he'd already told them. I would answer truthfully any question they asked. But they wouldn't have to ask anything that would lead them to Tania. I wanted him to know that.

When he walked me outside to my Jeep he succumbed to a bit of weakness and told me how lonely he had been in the weeks and months following Caroline's death. I didn't want to hear it, but I listened out of respect for the man. Apparently Irene Amsterdam came to the station one night complaining about a stalker. He was just getting off duty and he walked her home, went upstairs with her for coffee, and stayed the night.

"You ever done anything you wish you hadn't?" he asked.

I laughed. "Knock on any door."

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Sitting in my Jeep with the engine running, I said, "There's another reason I came out here."

He waited.

"There's no way Tania would want to hurt your wife," I said. "Since her mother died she hasn't had a soul in the world to call family. She needs a father. She deserves to know she has one."

I left him with that and drove back to the city.

I ran into Sylvia a few months after that. She told me that Tania was enrolling at the University of Maine and that Sergeant Burke had helped her get a student loan.

"He comes to the restaurant a lot more often than he used to," she said. "I guess they've become pretty good friends."

Solution to the May "Dying Words"

WORD LIST

A. Depth
B. Ivy League
C. Catch
D. Knee-highs
E. Renovation
F. Interview
G. Lovebird
H. East Haven
I. Yacht club
J. Tap dancing
K. Habitat
L. Earthworm
M. Commotion
N. Rehearsal
O. Unknowing
P. Drawers
Q. Effective
R. Replenish
S. Mandolin
T. Embellish
U. Toadstool
V. Hairs
W. Overheard
X. Decor
Y. Sandman

QUOTATION

Author—Dick Riley
Work—"THE CRUDER METHODS" from *The New Bedside, Bathtub & Armchair Companion to Agatha Christie,* edited by Dick Riley and Pam McAllister

"What do an ancient grain mill . . . and a . . . paperweight have in common? How about . . . a nylon stocking, . . . a chessboard, . . . and the ever-reliable revolver? . . . All . . . were used . . . by [Agatha] Christie to dispatch her victims. . . . She never lacked for invention in the methods of murder."

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THE PHANTOM ALIBI

"No! No!" said Armiston, the extinct author, with the air of a sorely tried man doing his best to be civil. He turned to his desk, made a great to-do of being busy and interrupted. He had an impulse to rise and dismiss the persistent visitor with a bow. But he hesitated to be so abrupt.

"Murder," said the author, "is distinctly not in my line."

Oliver Armiston's visitor smiled, throwing a look of secret understanding at the fat Buddha who reposed among folds of flesh in one corner of the elegant room.

"You turned it to very good account once," he said mildly.

"I recollect your crew did me the compliment to tell me I was guilty," nodded Armiston.

"The guiltiest man unhung!" retorted the visitor, with relish. "You procured that crime! Our moderation on that particular occasion still astonishes me."

He was a man of fierce aspect, but his eyes had the habit of merriment. Parr, the deputy commissioner, for it was that exalted policeman himself, was recalling an incident in Armiston's career several years gone by, when the famous author of thrillers was gulled by a clever stranger into solving as fiction what proved to be a problem of fact. The fertile author not only contrived (on paper) to rob the unprincipled wife of a diplomat, but when the tale was published, tasted the bitter triumph of finding the clever stranger had executed the crime according to printed direction, not even eliding the murder which to Armiston, engrossed in the plot, had seemed unavoidable. This atrocity, succeeded as it was by a mysterious gift from the grateful perpetrator, had created such a sensation as to drive Armiston into retirement. No! Decidedly murder was not in his line!

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Parr rose. Armiston forbore to look up for fear of detaining him. But Parr was not departing. He removed his top coat, remarking it was warm, and sat down again, smiling.

"You inspired that crime," said Parr easily.

"Your moderation on *this* occasion astonishes *me!*" broke in Armiston testily. "You arrest a reputable citizen for murder. You admit that the mere statement of the known facts, to any sane jury, would convict him. And then, as an officer sworn to uphold the law, you come privately to me, and say: 'Please, sir, as a personal favor, prove my prisoner innocent.' Is the man innocent, then?"

"Yes."

"Then why arrest him, why accuse him of murder, if you know that he is not guilty? Does the law require a victim? Do you intend to prosecute him?"

"Certainly. I have no option."

"Even if you know he is innocent?"

"Facts, my dear boy. Facts. I can't go beyond facts. *I* can't. You can."

"How do you know he is innocent?" In spite of himself, Armiston was giving heed. Nevertheless he was determined to smash Parr by logic, if insolence failed.

"How does a bird know North, in spring?" answered the imperturbable policeman, to whom nobody, not even his best friend, would have ascribed the smallest touch of imagination. He dealt with facts, as such; he was incapable of going beyond facts. He believed in shoe-leather and elbow-grease, not divination. Thus he had made his reputation as the very Nemesis of the law. And yet today he had come privately to the extinct author, whom he had not seen since that lamented circumstance of long ago, and said, somewhat astonished at his own words: "I am about to convict an innocent man of murder. Indeed I will, I must, unless you can find some way to prevent me." It was a tribute to the cogency of Armiston's fiction mind.

"Just what are the facts?" said Armiston, softening. And Parr, finally convinced that he had struck fire in his quest for subtlety of imagination to oppose his facts, hitched his chair nearer.

"Fingerprints—" he began . . .

"Bosh! Fingerprints are not facts!" cried Armiston, now fairly in the saddle. "Anybody can counterfeit fingerprints. It's merely a process of photography."

"There you are!" exclaimed the deputy, beaming on Buddha. "I didn't know that. I don't know it yet. Can it be done?"

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Armiston daubed his thumb with the ink-bottle cork, and stamped it on a sheet of paper, making his own thumbprint.

"Photograph that, life-size," said Oliver. "Print it on a pellicle of gelatine sensitized with bichromate of potash. Soak the gelatine in cold water. What have you? You will find on that pellicle of gelatine, in relief, the exact duplicate of the lines of my thumb. The lines stand up like type. Smear it with ink, grease, blood, anything—leave the imprint any place you want to—on a revolver handle, safe door, window—any place."

"Marvelous!"

"Not at all. Elemental," corrected Armiston dryly. "So much for your fingerprints! It's as old as the art of photography—it's used as a commercial process, to imitate photogravures. The trouble with you, Commissioner, is that you don't recognize a fact when you see it. You accept somebody's say-so. A fingerprint is gospel to you. It isn't to me. It's the first thing I suspect. I wonder how many poor devils you've sent up, with your facts." He paused, rather pleased with himself. "Now trot out some more facts."

"The murdered man was Sauer—J. H. Sauer," said the deputy.

"A reputable party?"

"No, I believe not. He had a process for making gold out of aluminum. It can be done, I am told."

"Did he do it?"

"Well, he did, and he didn't," said Parr. "He quietly interested a few people—good people—Brown, president of the Elm Park Bank, and Westcott, a technical man employed in the Assay Office, as another. Why is it," asked Parr, "that the clever crook selects the expert for his boob? This one did. Imagine Brown and Westcott, of all men in the world, falling for that sort of thing—the two men who above all others should have been wary. He demonstrated his process for them, and they were convinced he had what he claimed. There would be a pot of money in it, of course. But it meant a costly plant, to start. Well, when he found he had these two hog-tied, when they were willing to back him to the limit, Sauer got cold feet."

"Sauer? That's a new line, for a crook." Armiston, idly whittling a pencil, looked up.

"Wait." Parr was warming up. "After he had convinced the experts, the inventor himself began to have doubts. They were willing to go ahead, but he wasn't. He got the queer idea that he had been fooling himself, that there was a flaw somewhere. There was quite a row, I believe; but he wouldn't go ahead. They repeated that they were satisfied. He told them he didn't think their

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opinion was worth two whoops. Finally Brown, the banker, who saw riches slipping away from him, asked Sauer if he would be content to call in an umpire and let him decide. Well, Sauer backed and filled, and finally he said if they would call in an expert of unquestioned authority, all right. He would abide by the verdict. He didn't seem to be worrying over the fact that he might be fooling them. That was their lookout. He was afraid he was fooling himself."

The functionary of police chuckled softly to himself.

"Armiston," he said, "you told me once you were interested in electrolytic work. Didn't you study at the Polytechnic?"

Armiston nodded. He indicated a file of electrolytic journals on the bookshelf as indication that this branch of science was one he pursued from day to day, as a hobby.

"You know the big men in that line," said Parr. "Whom would you pick for an umpire? Is there one outstanding man?"

"Pettibone—Dean Pettibone," said Armiston, without hesitation.

Parr nodded, as if he had expected this answer.

"They picked Pettibone," he said.

"And he took one look, and gave them the laugh," put in Armiston. "I know just how he would do—without batting an eyelash. But what has this to do with murder? And your executing a man who didn't commit it?"

"Patience! I am coming to that," said Parr mildly. "Well, they made several dates. Pettibone agreed to come, not because he took any stock in it, but just to humor Brown. Then our friend Sauer contracted a jumping tooth. And for about three weeks he groaned in a dentist's chair, more concerned about saving that tooth, than he was about his million dollars. Finally the tooth was fixed up, and they had a session. Pettibone handed Sauer some aluminum, and Sauer went ahead with his usual hocus-pocus. When the thing was cooked, or pickled, or whatever there was to be done, he opened up the crucible to show the gold. Not a trace!"

Armiston grinned.

"Count on Petty for that!" he said.

"Well, they tried it again, and again. Nothing doing." Parr regarded Armiston with his dry smile. "It seems Sauer had been furnishing his own aluminum, hitherto. Salted it, I suppose. Those two experts never suspected him. You can get a trace of gold out of any sample of commercial aluminum—not enough to pay, but you can show it. Pettibone suspected what had happened. He handed Sauer a piece of chemically pure aluminum. And he didn't give him a chance to dope the brew. Then he laughed at him. There

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was quite a blowup. Brown quit cold, feeling as if he had been made a fool of. So did Westcott. They left in a huff. But Petty stayed behind, Sauer buttonholing him. The last Brown heard, Pettibone was explaining to Sauer, in words of one syllable, what kind of a crook he was."

"He'd do that—make it a point of honor," agreed Armiston. He yawned. "This is all very thrilling, Commissioner," he said. "But when do you produce the corpse?"

"We don't," said Parr, grimly.

"What? You can't execute a man for murder in this state, without a *corpus delicti.*"

"We can't produce it," repeated Parr. "And yet, we are going to send Pettibone to the chair."

"Pettibone!" ejaculated the extinct author, now sitting up stark. "You're going to execute Pettibone?" he repeated. "Oh, my dear fellow! Come, this is too much of a good thing—"

"Pettibone was the last man seen with Sauer, alive," went on Parr. "Something happened. Nobody knows just what. The engineer in the basement was roused by a racket. Then water began coming through the ceiling as if there was a flood upstairs. He called up the office, and with the nightman broke into Sauer's rooms, and found—"

"What?" exploded Armiston, for Parr had paused, smiling queerly.

"Nothing," said Parr. "Nobody there. The safe was open, a lot of papers were scattered about the floor. A chair or two was upset and broken; and the city water was pouring out of a broken pipe, from a connection that Sauer had had put in for his experiments. There had been a three-foot length of galvanized pipe over a lead sink. This pipe had been twisted off at the elbow, and there it lay on the floor. Somebody had been bludgeoned with it. On one end there was blood and hair. Otherwise—nothing."

"But the body—what became of the body?" demanded Armiston.

"What becomes of a lump of sugar in a glass of water?" retorted Parr. "It dissolves." He said in the same odd tone: "Well, that's what happened to Sauer. He dissolved."

" 'Dissolved?' "

"Pettibone's fingerprints were on one end of that pipe," said the policeman.

"Fingerprints, bah!" cried Armiston, angrily. To think that even police bungling would lay a sordid crime of this sort at the door of a man of Dean Pettibone's prestige was maddening.

"I will allow you that," said Parr. "But they led us to Petty. We searched his place. Why, I don't know. Only a fool would expect to

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find anything there. Still, he was the last man seen with Sauer alive—and something had happened to Sauer. In his laboratory Petty had a big lead tank full of liquid. We asked him what it was. He said it was residues. We drained that tank, and we found—this!"

He pushed his chubby fingers into a vest pocket and drew out a tiny ball of tissue paper, which he unwrapped carefully. He laid this small object of irregular shape on the desk. Armiston stared at it.

"It's gold, isn't it?" he said, puzzled. Parr nodded.

"It's the residue of our friend Sauer," he said coldly. "It is the *corpus delicti* that's going to convict Pettibone. It is the gold filling out of Sauer's tooth—the sole mortal remains of Sauer, that Pettibone couldn't dissolve in his vat."

Armiston sat down dumbstruck.

"Remember," continued Parr, with painful certitude, "it was only three weeks before, that the dentist made that filling. He used the amalgam process in making the pattern. He has the matrix—and it fits to a crossed T and a dotted I. Furthermore," said the policeman as he watched Armiston with keen eyes, "the dentist happens to have the preliminary rubber impression he took of Sauer's jaw. "You won't tell me you can counterfeit that. Those are the facts, Armiston," he concluded, and he leaned back in his chair to await the verdict.

In his schooldays Dean Pettibone had been Armiston's kindly guide and friend, one of those rare teachers who achieve something like saintship in the memory of their students.

"It's—preposterous—" Armiston began, and halted. "Are you going to maintain in court that dear old Petty—why he can't weigh a good hundred pounds—carried the dead body of Sauer across town, in the middle of the night, to get rid of him in his vat?"

" 'Preposterous?' " said Parr. "Not at all. It was midnight. Sauer's apartment was on the ground floor—with a private entrance in the side street. Pettibone admits he came and went in his coupé, alone. Nobody saw him leave Sauer's rooms. His laboratory is on a lonely road—I believe there was an element of danger in his research work, and a bad smell—and he had to get off by himself. Now do you say 'preposterous?' "

"Cobwebs!" cried Armiston contemptuously. "Use a little reason."

" 'Reason?' " said the deputy. "There is no reason in a crime of violence. But that!—" He pointed to the tiny fragment of gold, every accidental irregularity of whose surface testified incontrovertibly to its identity. He turned fiercely on Armiston. "What are you going to do about that?"

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"You can't establish a murder, with only a gold tooth to show," muttered Armiston.

"Can't I? Take the classic Webster-Parkman case as an example."

The deputy commissioner rose and pulled on his coat slowly. "The jury won't leave its seat," he said absently. "Regrettable, yes, to balance a man like Petty against a cheap trickster." He picked up the particle of gold and restored it to its tissue paper and as he put it back in his pocket, he murmured, "It will send your friend Petty to the chair."

Without a leave-taking he stalked out. In the street the police functionary permitted himself a complacent smile as he looked up at Armiston's windows. Unless he was very much mistaken, he had started a fire.

When Armiston emerged, he at once became conscious of something in the air. Not infrequently, even in a city of such involved complexes as this, there comes a moment, an occasion when street-sweeper and apple-woman, milady and her maid, stockbroker and greengrocer think the same thought, as if an idea had become static, and anchored itself over them like a fog. On this day every street corner had its little group, heads together; in the restaurant where Armiston lunched, usually decorous people craned their necks over their neighbors' newspapers; the female cashier instead of saying, "It's a nice day," said, "Wasn't it awful about the vat?"

The latest extra blared in large type—HELD WITHOUT BAIL! One couldn't escape it; in the quietest side street the eddies of the news danced and swirled, the vat murder was on the tip of the tongue wherever one turned. The sleuth-hounds of the press, long fretting on the leash, were loose, full cry. This single obscure crime summoned into being myriad phenomena of human interest and activity.

Momentarily there had been doubt, unbelief. But the facts were overwhelming. Then, as if by some common process of thought, the world of newspaper readers became sophists. At Armiston's club his friend Ballard voiced the tone of public debate when he said:

"The real crime was Pettibone's overlooking that gold tooth. He deserves the chair for that. Pettibone, a chemist, tripping up on a solvent for gold! I condemn his bungling after the blow was struck. But for the grace of God—as someone said somewhere," said Ballard, eyeing the cultivated circle, "you or I might have struck that blow. In each of us is a moment of blind fury, waiting to be

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summoned. Most of us escape the summons. Pettibone didn't. What then? Should his career of public usefulness be annihilated, simply because instinct overwhelmed reason, for a split second? I say, no!"

"I say, no!" responded several of the circle.

"Pettibone is a man of rare mind," went on the sophist. "He knew what he had to lose. Therefore the more reason to conceal his act. And he, a chemist," cried Ballard in disgust, "trips up on a problem a schoolboy wouldn't have missed—the solvent for gold."

"What is the defense?" asked Armiston, for Ballard was a famous pleader.

"None!" said the lawyer savagely. "Not yet—not for another hundred years. Sauer was a despicable swindler. A decent man, a righteous man, removes him—kills him. And now we, in the name of justice, purpose to annihilate Pettibone, a man with a brain a thousand years ahead of his time!"

Armiston went through a daily ritual before his typewriter. He inserted a recording sheet, lightly brushed his fingertips, and gazed abstractedly at the keys. He had great faith in this oracle; time and again, with almost clairvoyant powers, it had solved problems for him. It was probable that the cerebral ganglion in Armiston's fingertips led him, on those occasions, through the maze of the keyboard. But now the oracle was mute.

"Petty slipped up, for once in his life," mused Armiston for the hundredth time as he stared at the blank wall with opaque eyes, his fingers poised above the keys.

Then suddenly, and without admonitory signal, the oracle spoke! Armiston's fingers, moving mechanically, tapped the keys.

"Did Sauer?" demanded the typewriter.

Armiston felt a queer pricking at the back of his neck. There was something uncanny in the way those two words spontaneously formed themselves before his eyes. He let his thoughts drift. Did Sauer? Did Sauer slip up any place?

That was as far as he could get. The typewriter relapsed into Delphian silence, and his fingers refused to move.

"Obviously," said Armiston, "that implies motive, on the part of Sauer."

The oracle refused to be drawn into an argument.

Armiston took a stroll through the park, conjuring himself to think. But that typewriter had become so necessary to his process of thought in his years of scribbling that without it he found himself stranded.

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"Parr," he said to that person of the police an hour later, "who was Sauer? Did he ever really exist?"

"Apparently he was a fact. You might ask Brown, or Westcott," answered Parr.

"Who was he, before he came here?"

"A mining engineer," said Parr. "Brown looked up his references. Sauer wasn't exactly a shade, Armiston. He was flesh and blood enough to be bashed on the head with a bludgeon."

Oliver ignored the sarcasm.

"What did he leave as an estate, besides that gold filling?" he persisted.

"There's a bank balance—about eight hundred dollars."

"That's something. What else?"

Parr drew forth a small bundle of slips, on which J. H. Sauer had, on one insignificant occasion or another, signed his name. It was the handwriting of a habitual draughtsman, as characteristic in its way as that of a telegrapher. Armiston studied the script with the interest of one who, for the first time, comes on the incontrovertible proof of the life and activity of a person who heretofore has existed for him merely as a name. The sprite here nudged Oliver's elbow.

"Did Sauer?" it whispered, out of the thin air. Armiston departed. Late in the afternoon he presented himself at the home of Dean Pettibone, a little red brick house encircled by a veranda, near the University. Parr had given him a line to the policeman in charge, for the Law had put its seals here.

"I'm trying to help," he explained lamely to the dried-up little secretary, a woman who had not aged by a hair in twenty years, as he remembered her. "We are all trying to help. I want to look round."

"His life is an open book," she said. "You remember his 'log.' They've been through it again and again."

It was a life of an open book, a book of volumes. Dean Pettibone's one marked peculiarity was the desire to set down everything from day to day, as a conscientious navigator would make up his log. Pettibone, with the precise mind of a born scientist, had the habit of saying that, of all the human faculties, one's memory was the least entitled to trust and respect. Endowed with a photographic memory, he never permitted himself to trust it. That Sauer should not have left some premonitory shadow in this human document, which reflected so minutely, seemed absurd—at least from a metaphysical standpoint. But Armiston was not voyaging in the realms of metaphysics, as he turned page after

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page, under the scrutiny of the sleepy policeman and the anxious little old maid.

A month passed. The rubber band of pubic interest, measured by the barometer of newspaper circulation, was moving on through other fields of force. The vat murder had subsided. On the side of Pettibone there was nothing to be expected. The Dean had contented himself with a single explicit statement, in the beginning. His respect for words and their uses gave his denial of guilt at once a simplicity and a completeness that were almost classic. Here was a man accused of murder, with no resources save the dignity of his bare word, who made no effort to conceal his contempt for the stupidity of inflexible justice. The little savant passed his days of waiting in a cell amid peace and quiet that he had always craved, but never before achieved, buried in his books.

The mighty voice of the press even found time to record with much humor how Oliver Armiston, the once popular author of thrillers, absent-mindedly dropped his eyeglasses into a mail-box instead of a letter, rendering himself visually helpless until a postman appeared and permitted the author to paw among the letters for his lenses.

"They never come back!" muttered the deputy commissioner with conviction, as he noted this silly item. More and more, as the days dragged on without incident, the police official regretted having exposed his own fallibility to the extinct author in the vain hope of some supernormal help.

"The State rests."

Fielder, the District Attorney, turned to Ballard, counsel for the accused, and as he sat down he muttered under his breath in a tone that carried only to that man's ears:

"God help you! I have done what I could. Facts are facts!"

Parr sat back in his chair, his arms folded across his chest, looking glum. Judge and jury turned expectantly to Ballard, famous barrister, who had stepped into the case at the last minute. During the presentation of the State's evidence against his client, Ballard had indulged only in formalities; in several incidents it seemed that he went to extraordinary lengths in inducing witnesses to emphasize the damning facts of their testimony.

"Make a plea. We will accept anything in reason," muttered the District Attorney under his breath. Ballard turned on him a look of slow astonishment, and indicated the placid little figure of the prisoner with a slight nod, as who should say: "Can you imagine such a man as that accepting a mitigation of the charge!"

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Ballard rose to his feet, stood for a long time surveying the jury, whose appetite had been whetted for one of the great forensic addresses for which this man was famous, and said only, "The defense will call only one witness in refutation."

A little thrill ran through the room. Ballard looked at his watch and stepped to the bench where he consulted in low tones with the Court and the prosecutor, and a brief recess was declared. Courtroom and jury box, held in vague suspense, waited; the scene wore that tension of dramatic action momentarily halted. The first interruption was the entrance, somewhat breathlessly, of Oliver Armiston; he dropped into a seat beside Ballard, giving the inquiring deputy a scant nod. Parr noted with surprise that the extinct author sported a badly swollen eye. The green doors opened a second time, and two court officers appeared, followed by a middle-aged man, evidently a person of some position in life. He looked neither to right nor left, as he came down the aisle and stolidly took his place in the witness chair, as the court was called to order again. Then he glanced around stiffly, and when he encountered the face of Dean Pettibone, his eyes lingered there for a moment.

"Your name?" said Ballard.

The witness wetted his lips.

"Hilary Jerome Swett."

"Your occupation?"

"I am an inventor," said the man.

"Do you know the defendant, Mr. Swett?" pursued Ballard.

The witness nodded, and turned his gaze again on Pettibone.

"When did you last see him?"

"In 1912," said the witness, without hesitation. "In the Federal Court."

"What was the occasion?"

"A patent suit," responded Swett.

"You were an interested party?"

"I was the plaintiff."

"And Dean Pettibone?"

"He was called to give expert testimony." The man drew a deep breath, and the whole room hitched forward in its seats.

"What was the outcome of the suit?"

"I lost—my case was thrown out of court." The words were so low as to be hardly audible.

"Was the expert testimony responsible for the verdict?"

"Yes," he said; the witness seemed now to have thoroughly recovered his composure. "Wholly," he added.

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Ballard picked up one of the exhibits on the table and examined it absently for a moment. Then he raised his eyes to the witness and asked with great gravity.

"Are your teeth entire, Mr. Swett?"

The effect of this question was like a pistol shot. The Dean, the prosecutor, even the Court, exclaimed audibly. The witness started, violently; he blanched. He grasped the arms of the chair until the veins stood out on his wrists, and turning mechanically, he sought again the now searching eyes of the prisoner.

"Are all your teeth intact, Mr. Swett?" persisted the lawyer, cold and incisive. He held up to view the object in his hand; it was the rubber impression of the upper jaw of the murdered man, one incontrovertible link in the chain of circumstantial evidence that the law had been forging about Dean Pettibone these last three days.

"I ask particularly," continued Ballard, now suddenly stentorian, "about the first bicuspid, of the right upper jaw. Will you please show the jury," he urged, advancing on the witness who seemed to have become stone. Ballard opened his own mouth and indicated with a finger, the tooth.

The answer was unexpected action, almost too swift for the staring eyes to register. With a single bound, Swett was out of his seat; he cleared the steps in a stride and bowled over the obstructing figure of his tormentor. With almost the same gesture he seized a chair, and raising it above his head, charged on Dean Pettibone, crying shrilly:

"You die! You die now! I take you with me!"

It was Armiston, unused to protective reflexes as he was, who fell on the advancing madman as he towered over the little Dean, and the pair went to the floor with a crash. The next instant the court officers had pinioned the struggling Swett.

"Your Honor, and gentlemen of the jury!" rang out the triumphant voice of Ballard over the din of pounding gavel and the shouts of the officers restoring order, "behold the *corpus delicti!* Behold the murdered man, in person!"

"Sauer *was* a phantom," said Armiston, moulding a cigarette with finished care. He was tasting tribute. This was the first time wittingly the author had ever set the stage of his typewriter with real characters and watched them walk through their parts. "Luckily we were able to provide the *corpus delicti* with an alibi. Else," added the beaming author, turning to the little Dean who sat balanced on the end of a sofa, "our conscientious friend here

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might have added another notch to his gun, Dean."

Parr took his sally woodenly.

"Ninety-nine per cent of my work is common sense," said he. "I leave the ouija-board one per cent to the fiction writers."

"Swett set up the fictitious identity of Sauer, with proper make-up, to be murdered," went on the author. "That was his game from the beginning. He took eight years to do it. Once he established the identity, he plotted to be brought to Pettibone, to quarrel with him, to have Pettibone the last man seen with him alive. Then he planted his bludgeon, his fake fingerprints, and the gold filing—and vanished, leaving the rest to Parr. That's all there is to it."

"But how—how?" demanded Parr, who had arrived at the state of openly admiring his own perspicacity in enlisting the aid of the hectic author.

"Habit," said Oliver sententiously. "It's the strongest impulse we have. It's not born; it's acquired. It attacks man's faculties in their weakest spot. If you ask the Dean, he will tell you that man's weakest faculty is his memory."

The Dean admitted as much with a nod.

"But how—how did you trace him—how did you catch him?" insisted the deputy, in his hunger for facts.

"He caught himself," said Armiston. "You went ahead on the belief that it was the Dean who erred. It wasn't the Dean. It was Sauer. You had seventy-three copies of J. H. Sauer's signature, Parr. I dug up thirty-six more. Once he signed it 'H. J.,' instead of 'J. H.' There is one thing in the world a man isn't apt to forget—although the Dean won't admit it: That's his own name. J. H. Sauer did. Once! That was enough," Armiston laughed, shaking his head at the deputy. "Parr, it all lay before your eyes, waiting to be picked up."

"Still I don't see," said the deputy. "Swett hasn't a criminal record. How trace one 'H. J. Somebody' among a million?"

"Oh, it wasn't as bad as that," laughed Armiston. "The only 'H. J. Somebody' to interest me would be in Pettibone's log book. I found H. J. Swett's name there. That was enough to go on. Then I found H. J. Swett himself, living obscurely—the discredited plaintiff of a million-dollar patent suit can't exactly lose himself. During the three months J. H. Sauer was dickering with Brown and Westcott to be brought to Pettibone, there was no trace of H. J. Swett. That was another trump card. Then I wanted his handwriting. I schemed all sorts of ways, but failed. Finally I robbed the mails." Oliver shook with merriment. "I saw him mail a letter. After he was gone, I absent-mindedly mailed my own eye glasses in that same drop-box, and then yelled bloody murder, till the postman

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came along and opened the box for me. Then with a facility that actually alarmed me, I palmed Swett's letter. There was no doubt which one it was when I saw the handwriting."

The little circle, Ballard, Parr, the District Attorney, and the Dean himself, nodded their admiration at this confession of robbery of the mails.

"That brings us to the final curtain. I wanted to ask H. J. Swett one question—about that tooth. He must have pulled it, to extract that gold filling. Then he probably had another put in, in its place. How to find out, stumped me. I consulted Ballard, who has the direct mind of a child, and some lawyers," said Armiston. "Ballard said, 'Put him on the stand as a material witness, and ask him.' Nothing simpler. Swett might reasonably be called as a witness, because he lost a million dollars through the Dean's expert testimony in that patent suit. It jarred Swett when he found where he was. But he had great nerve, and he carried it through, until Ballard asked him about that tooth. Then you saw what happened."

The author tenderly caressed his swollen eye, now rapidly taking on a violet hue.

"Swett had been living pretty retired," he went on. "He was reading all the papers, and gloating—but he stayed behind his shutters. This morning I think he got nervous. He ran out his car and started off uptown. There was only one way to stop him. Ram him! I rammed him! Then I smashed him in the eyes with my fist, accusing him of wrecking me. We were knocking off each other's hats when a cop pried us apart and took us to jail. He didn't dare ask for bail—so we had him on ice, so to speak."

The little group broke up. Dean Pettibone sat for some time with his hand shading his eyes, as he codified his thoughts. Then, "Miss Pruyn," he called, and his little secretary entered. "Will you please take dictation, Miss Pruyn," he said gently, drawing up a chair for her, and taking up his notes. "We have quite a hiatus to fill, haven't we? One must never neglect such things."

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THE STORY THAT WON

The December Mysterious Photograph contest was won by *Donna Thomas* of Maywood, Illinois. Honorable mentions go to James Hagerty of Melbourne, Florida; Steven E. Albrecht of Helena, Montana; Shawn Kirby of Dallas, Georgia; R. B. Owen of Carp, Ontario, Canada; Margaret Loyd of Weaverville, North Carolina; Dianne C. Perrone of Franklin, Wisconsin; J. W. Doak of Phoenix, Arizona; Miranda Wessel of Tygh Valley, Oregon; and David Kingery of Snohomish, Washington.

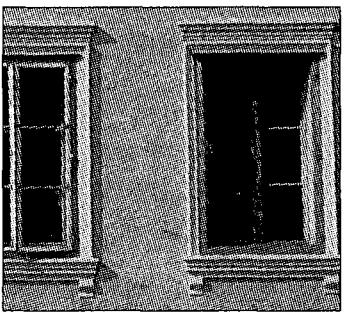

Photo by Willie Rose

DEAD WRONG

DONNA THOMAS

Word got out about a bank job the "Company" pulled and my father was labeled the rat. He *was* a boozer and, liquored up, might have talked. After Pop disappeared, I oozed Company loyalty. But somehow the Feds got more information and I guessed the Company brass figured . . . like father like son, you know? I got the call.

The Turk's voice was low. "Mario, there's been a leak," he said.

"I heard," I responded.

"Know anything about that?" the Turk inquired.

"I don't know nothing," I countered, and meant it.

"Mario—I know where your old man is."

I thought of Bosco, who had embezzled Company funds. His wife had been pickled and packed in several Mason jars. "The Smith Building, third floor, six o'clock—he's all cleaned up for you." Click.

Five thirty found me at the abandoned-looking Smith Building, switchblade within easy grasp. I spotted Pop—nothing but bones—displayed in the window! A fire rose in my belly. Then the Turk was behind me. "You're early," he said. Hands moving faster than my brain, I knifed him in the gut and ran upstairs to the biggest shock of my life.

The bones were by the window where I expected. But I didn't expect the doctor's office there . . . or my living, breathing father! After hugging and crying, Pop explained. "Turk's doctor helped me kick the booze! I'm all cleaned up for you, son!"

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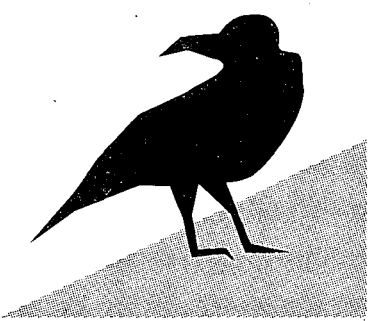

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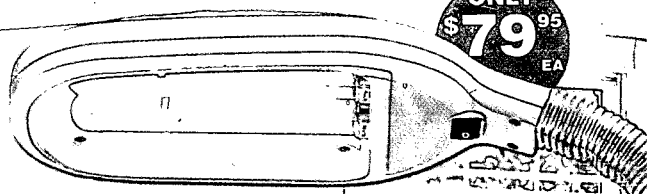

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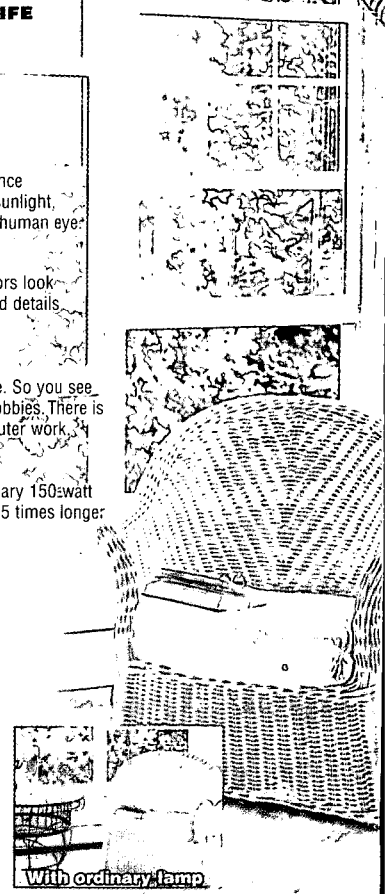

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